

THE LOSS OF SACREDNESS IN THE  
TRADITIONAL COSTA RICAN BRIBRI CONIC HOUSE

by

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## ABSTRACT

One of the most important factors present through history in the design and creation of spaces is the relationship between architecture and the sacred. Today, the problem seems to be that we no longer live in a sacred world, and we can see this pattern in the loss of the sacredness of traditional building types and structures around the world.

One example is the phenomenon taking place in the Talamancan region of Costa Rica, where a traditional sacred house type—the dwelling of the Bribri tribe—has changed in the past years and has now become just a functional structure where people live. The Bribri house and its changes in both form and meaning are the object of this study. The main objective is to understand how and why this dwelling type was traditionally considered sacred and how over time the loss of its 'holiness' affects the Bribri's culture and spiritual values. It is my intention to understand the sacred and how it appears in built form; and how the findings of this research can perhaps be applied in the future to the contemporary design of more meaningful architecture.

In terms of organization, this thesis is structured in five chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the phenomenon to be studied—the Bribri house—and reviews basic information on the subject. Chapter 2 includes a literature review of sacred space concepts. Theories in the works of Mircea Eliade, Yi-Fu Tuan, Edward Relph, Linda Graber and Belden Lane are explored. Chapter 3 presents my own experiences with the houses and explores my descriptions, photographs, and interviews I conducted with the Bribri. Chapter 4 examines in detail the anthropological and architectural research sources above dealing with the Bribri house forms, meanings, and rituals practiced both before, during and after construction. Chapter 5 concludes by discussing how, through my experience and contact with the Bribri and through other related information, I have come to understand why these houses are no longer sacred and what the consequences are.

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# **CHAPTER 1**

## **SACREDNESS AND THE TRADITIONAL HOUSE OF THE COSTA RICAN BRIBRI TRIBE**

In order to build, it is my position that an architect should first understand what is it that should be built and why. Architecture is not just the creation of spaces but it goes beyond the profession itself and involves all human aspects. One of the most important factors present through history in the design and creation of spaces is the relationship between architecture and the sacred.

Since ancient times, we have built spaces that are sacred to us, spaces where we get in contact with a force that is not from this world. Today, examples of buildings that produce this experience include cathedrals, churches, mosques, ruins and landscapes. In early eras, when people were more in contact with the natural world, almost every building was considered sacred. Examples are found in ruins and artifacts of ancient tribes around the world.

Today, the problem seems to be that we no longer live in a sacred world. We have come to a point where knowledge, science and technology appear to explain everything as rational events. Today's space is profane (Eliade, 1957). It no longer puts us in contact with the 'holy other'. And architecture built today shows this phenomenon very clearly. We can see it in new buildings that appear to be technological marvels but that have no relation to the very basic human nature of dwelling. We can also see this pattern in the loss of the sacredness of building types and structures around the world. Everyday more and more traditional types of housing and sacred spaces become less important for the people that built them. The contact between the technological-profane societies and the natural-sacred cultures has apparently diminished the interest of many traditional peoples to be in contact with the 'holy other'.

One example is the phenomenon taking place in the Talamanca region in Costa Rica, where a traditional sacred house type, home of the Bribri Tribe, has changed in the past years and has now become just a functional structure where people live. As Jeffrey M. Golliher explains, "changes in [the Bribri's] material culture over the last four hundred years reflect changes in the adaptation to a cultural and physical landscape altered by nonindigenous cultures. The change from circular to rectangular houses among the Bribri... involves a series of factors including migrations, subsistence, social organization, and other matters indirectly involved in house construction" (Golliher, 1977, p. 145).

As a Costa Rican, I became interested in this issue after my first visit to the Bribri Region. I went there to study the sensory experience of the conic houses I had so many times seen in pictures and photos in my history books. I was amazed by the relationship of the house and its materials

to the surrounding environment. But when I first arrived to Suretka, in the lower Talamanca region, I noticed there were no conic houses, but just rectangular dwelling types. I then started to investigate the reasons and became interested in the topic of sacred space.



Fig 1.1. Rectangular Bribri House, Talamanca, Costa Rica, 2002. Photo: Luis Diego Quiros.

The Bribri House and its changes in both form and meaning are the object of this study. The main objective is to understand how and why the particular dwelling type was traditionally considered sacred and how over time the loss of its 'holiness' affects the Bribri's culture and spiritual values. It is my intention to understand the sacred and how it appears in built form; and how the findings of this research can perhaps be applied in the future to the contemporary design of more meaningful spaces.

### **The Talamanca Region**

With elevations from 600 to 3000 meters above the sea level, the Talamanca region is located on the Costa Rican south border with Panama. It can be considered relatively isolated because of its wild jungle characteristics, its geographical features and few access roads to the site. Two main tribal groups live in the region, the Bribri and the Cabecares. They occupy mountainous zones on both sides of the Talamanca range as well as the Atlantic coastal lowlands. As a result of

minimal contact with Spanish colonists and of their remote location, these two groups represent the largest remaining indigenous populations in Costa Rica.

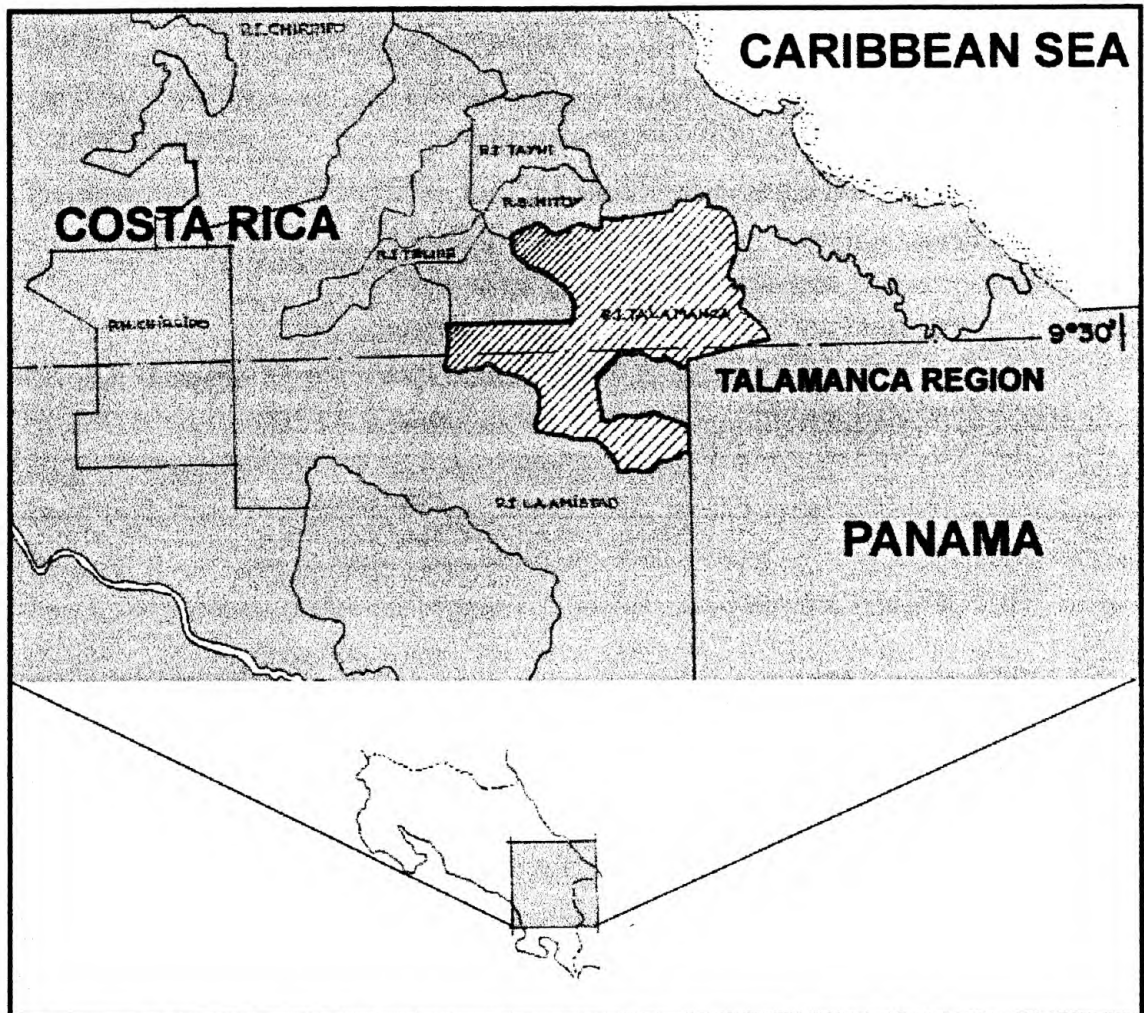


Fig 1.2. Map of the Talamanca Region, Costa Rica (Gonzalez, 2000, p.17).

Rainfall is high, rising with altitude as temperature drops and winds increase. The tribes originally occupied the lowlands, following a nomadic subsistence agriculture in response to year-round crops like beans, plantains, cassava and corn. The Bribris used to obtain what they needed from the forest: hunting and fishing were the most important ways to gather food. But as more lands are lost to the outsiders, the tribes are moving into other mountainous zones, changing their subsistence patterns. More than a 120 species of domestic and wild crops per hectare exist in the zone, including subsistence crops, medicinal plants, commercial crops. Building and boat construction, firewood, crafts, natural pesticides and legumes are also part of the tribes' survival elements.

Scale	Household, subsistence farm, population, rural community, local region.
Location	Upper Talamanca Valley, Limon Province, Costa Rica (82.8 - 83.3 W, 9.6 - 9.3 N.)
Elevation	600 to 3000 meters.
Climate	Tropical rainforest.
Agricultural Region	Plantation agriculture, shifting cultivation.
Population Density	13.5 persons/square kilometer.
Principal Crops	More than 120 species of domestic and wild crops per hectare, including subsistence crops, medicinal plants, commercial crops, building and boat construction, firewood, crafts, natural pesticides, and legumes.
Domestic Animals	Pigs, poultry; wild animals and birds
Soils	Inceptisols. Seasonally saturated with water.
Natural Vegetation	Broadleaf evergreen trees.
Ecoregion	Rainforest Altitudinal Zone.

Table 1.1. Main geographical and human characteristics of the Talamanca Region (Castillo, 1956, p. 3).

Both tribes, the Bribri and the Cabecares, maintain their language and traditions. The Bribri use more Spanish, with bilingual education throughout the region. Today, in total, 90% of the habitants speak Spanish and 75% still speak their Bribri dialect. In general, the Bribri still practice their traditional religious beliefs, but 90% of 5,836 population is Catholic. The tribe occupies an area of 43,690 hectares, having in the habitable zones a population density of 13.5 persons per square kilometer.

#### **U-Sure: The Conic Sacred House**

For hundreds of years now, the Bribri have been building what in their dialect is known as *U-Sure*, a conic house built out of natural materials such as wood obtained from the trunk of the *bejuco real* and palm leaves, or *suíta* as the indigenous people call them. For the Bribri, the house's meanings and symbolisms keep Bribri history alive. It is a representation of their cosmology, it serves as a way to remember how their god, *Sibu*, created the Earth and their first ancestors. For them, the conic house is a way to remember the creation of the 'great cosmic house'.



A very basic description of the house and its change in form through the years is given in the *Encyclopedia of Vernacular Architecture*:

The Bribri U-Sure was called fortress (*palenque*) by the Spanish due to its outer protective walls in earlier centuries. Many houses have become rectangular; only a few U-sures still exist. The dimension varied with the number of occupants, but 15 meters (50 feet) in height, with a similar diameter, was common. The center post is used only during construction, with 8 to 12 evenly spaced perimeter columns. These follow the cardinal directions, with the first post facing the rising sun, the second the setting sun, the next two placed north and south; additional posts fall between, as necessary. The secondary vertical members meet at the cusp, and are tied to cross braces with *bejuco real* (*anthurium scandens*). Then the roof of *suita leaves* (*geonoma congesta*) is added, obscuring the walls as it reaches the ground. The single door opens to the east, protected from rain by an extended shed covering (Oliver, 1997, p.1771).



Fig 1.3. Traditional Bribri Conic House, Talamanca, Costa Rica, 1901. Photo: National Museum Archives.

The U-Sure is, then, not just a house, a space to live. Rather it is a complex realistic and magical conception and representation of the Bribri's universe. It contains the symbolisms of many of their cosmological ideas and perceptions. Through the building process and the built form, the Bribri continue to carry and explain their tradition and conception of the universe.

But in the past decades, as we shall see in the next chapters, the house form and the traditions that accompanied it have changed. The conic house has been replaced by a rectangular form type that is no longer considered sacred, that no longer represents the Bribri universe or carries their traditions. Today's rectangular houses are not accompanied by rituals or sacred significances. Instead, they have become a functional solution to the contemporary situation of the tribe.

### **The Literature on the Bribri House and Culture**

Other authors have been interested in the Bribri house and culture before. They have traveled, lived, and shared with the indigenous people in order to be able to interpret and understand their beliefs and cultural expressions.

Among the first texts on the Talamanca region we find the writings of William M. Gabb (1978). An explorer and investigator, Gabb first traveled to the region in 1873. As an anthropologist, he faces an unstudied field and uses concepts based on social, political and religious ties. He explored the Bribri understanding of life and the universe, specially death and birth. His memoirs are presented in the book *Talamanca: the Space and the People* (Gabb, 1978, originally 1880).

Maria Eugenia Bozzoli has produced probably the most important body of work about the Bribri and the indigenous cultures in Costa Rica. Her unpublished Ph.D. thesis, *Birth and Death in the Belief System of the Bribri Indians of Costa Rica* (Bozzoli, 1975), and later published in Spanish, explores the traditional conceptions, meanings and symbolisms in the Bribri culture. Her work also includes several writings and articles on Bribri narrations, legends, mythologies and medicine. Another of Bozzoli's books, *The Indigenous Costa Rican and His Environment: Uses and Adaptations* (Bozzoli, 1986) presents a general characterization of the different social and economical structures found among the indigenous tribes of Costa Rica and their relationship to the natural environment where they were developed. In her latest book, *The Costa Rican Indigenous in the XXI Century* (Bozzoli, 2002) Bozzoli analyzes the actual situation and problems of different tribes. In it she proposes a series of guidelines in search for a better future for the indigenous cultures of Costa Rica.

Roberto Castillo and Carlos Borge's *Culture and Conservation in the Indigenous Talamanca* (Castillo, 1956) also analyzes the reality of the Bribri culture. These authors describe the physical, cultural, economical and social situation of the tribes in the Talamanca region. The book also



proposes that the Bribri social-economical structure and its adaptations to natural conditions of the region helped preserve its. The author emphasizes the need to keep it unchanged.

One of the most, if not the most important, study on the Talamancan dwelling type to date is *The Cosmic Talamancan House* (Gonzalez and Gonzalez, 2000). Written by an architect and an anthropologist, this book investigates the meanings and symbolisms found in the traditional conic Bribri house. The book thoroughly describes the structure as well as the significance of all the house's elements. It considers the house as a "microcosms through which the Bribri cosmological universe can be explained" (Gonzalez and Gonzalez, 2000, p.11).

Jeffrey Golliher (1977) also writes about the Bribri house in his article, "*Community Houses of Talamanca, Costa Rica*". He explains the transformation from conic to rectangular houses among the Bribri. He proposes a series of factors, including migrations, subsistence and social organization, as the causes for this change, and he explains that "changes in their material culture over the last four hundred years reflect changes in adaptation to a cultural and physical landscape altered by nonindigenous cultures" (Golliher, 1977, p.2).

These works are used as one base to investigate and analyze the phenomenon of the change from conic to rectangular dwelling types in the Bribri culture.

## **Thesis Structure**

In order to understand the Talamanca House phenomenon, one first needs to establish the way in which they are going to be studied. In part, this thesis will make use of phenomenology, which David Seamon has defined as follows:

Phenomenology is the interpretative study of human experience. The aim is to examine and clarify human situations, events, meanings, and experiences as they spontaneously occur in the course of daily life. The goal is a rigorous description of human life as it is lived and reflected upon in all of its first-person concreteness, urgency, and ambiguity (Seamon, 2000, p. 157).

Seamon proposes three specific phenomenological methods that can be used by researchers to understand a particular phenomenon: first, first-person phenomenological research, where the researcher uses his own firsthand experience of the phenomenon as a basis for examining its specific characteristics and qualities, second, existential-phenomenological research, based on the experiences of specific individuals and groups involved in actual situations and places; and third, hermeneutic-phenomenological research, which is based on the interpretation of texts, by which a meant material object or tangible expression is imbued in some way with human meaning

(e.g., public documents, personal journals, paintings, sculptures, poems, buildings and so forth). In this thesis all these three methods are used in combination to obtain a broader and better understanding of the phenomenon.

In terms of organization, this thesis is structured in five chapters.

- Chapter 1 has introduced the phenomenon to be studied—the Bribri house—and reviewed basic information on the subject.
- Chapter 2 of the thesis includes a literature review of sacred space concepts. Theories in the works of Mircea Eliade (1957), Ying Fu-Tuan (1971, 1974), Edward Relph (1976), Linda Graber (1978) and Belden Lane (1988) are explored.
- Chapters 3 and 4 examine the Talamancan House in detail. The third chapter presents my own experiences with the houses and explores my descriptions, sketches, pictures and the interviews I conducted with the Bribris. This chapter includes both my sensory experience and reaction to these house structures as well as my thoughts during my visits. The fourth chapter examines in detail the theories and information provided by the research sources above in regard to the house forms, meanings, and rituals practiced both before, during and after construction.
- Chapter 5 concludes by discussing how, through my experience and contact with the Bribris and through other materials related to the matter, I have come to understand why these houses are no longer sacred and what the consequences are. This chapter includes my point of view on the situation and my recommendations for future buildings and architecture.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **THE SACRED**

Have you ever stood in front of the ocean and wondered? Have you ever experienced a joy so big, you can't explain it? Have you ever wondered about the space where that experience happened? The people in Talamanca did. Since the beginnings of history, mankind has been confronted with existential questions. Who are we? Where do we come from? Where we go after we die?... Is there something beyond life?... someone?

Architecture, as an expression of human life on Earth, happens in the same realm. By this I mean that if we believe there is something else beyond this life—a 'wholly other' as Eliade calls it—then, what we build is also capable of creating, expressing and even enhancing that presence.

Through centuries, human expressions such as art, architecture, literature and language have been used to express this feeling of being in the presence of something other than a tangible reality. Through the hermeneutical study of verbal traditions, texts, objects and spaces, many have interpreted this phenomenon and created a large body of literature related to the sacred. By using the hermeneutical phenomenological approach, authors like Mircea Eliade (1957), Yi-Fu Tuan (1971, 1974) and Robert Mugerauer (1994) have interpreted human expressions and explored their own ideas in relation to the presence of the 'wholly other' in this world. This chapter introduces the concept of the sacred and reviews some important theories on its relation to places and spaces.

#### **The Sacred**

Architectural experience, as a part of our lives and of our "being in the world," raises existential questions and sometimes even provides for 'out of this world' events to happen. These experiences, according to authors such as Rudolf Otto (1917) and Mircea Eliade (1957), are where the *numinous*—the wholly other, the sacred—appears in human life (Mugerauer, 1994). Eliade designates this act of manifestation of the sacred with the term *hierophany* (Eliade, 1957). As Robert Mugerauer explains:

According to Eliade, the sacred manifests itself in this world by showing itself in or through things: natural things, built forms, symbols and so on. The sacred breaks through the homogenous and establishes the world in its fullness, making it what it is. Eliade calls this act of manifestation of the sacred power or reality, hierophany. Since some things participate in the sacred, they become saturated with Being and significance (Mugerauer, 1994, p. 57).

Some like to call this experience the metaphysical experience of architecture, and others call it 'sacred experience.' Mircea Eliade, the author of *The Sacred and The Profane* (Eliade, 1957) argues that we are able to experience the 'Wholly Other' in this material life; that the numinous experience can happen on earth. He explains:

The numinous presents itself as something 'wholly other' (ganz andere), something basically and totally different. It is like nothing human or cosmic; confronted with it, man senses his profound nothingness, feels that he is only a creature, or in the words of Abraham addressed to the Lord, is "but dust and ashes". The Sacred always manifests itself as a reality of a wholly different order from the 'natural' realities (Eliade, 1957, p. 9).

Eliade also proposes that most of modern human life is profane. In other words, the sacred only appears from time to time and that we have separated ourselves from the possibilities of experiencing what goes beyond the physical. In a sense, Edward Relph discusses the same theme in his *Place and Placelessness* (Relph, 1976). Relph argues that we have shifted from a deep association to place to a rootless and separated experience of place. In other words, space is no longer as meaningful as it used to be and it is harder these days to find a place to which we can really relate, not just physically but existentially. Relph proposes that our experience of the world today has a deep correlation to placelessness:

If places are indeed a fundamental aspect of man's existence in the world, if they are sources of security and identity for individuals and for groups of people, then it is important that the means of experiencing, creating and maintaining significant places are not lost. Moreover there are many signs that these very means are disappearing and that *placelessness*—the weakening of distinct and diverse experiences and identities of places—is now a force (Relph, 1976, p. 6).

This result, for me as an architect and as a person, is not desirable. That is why this thesis studies a sacred space: because I want to understand how the sacred shows itself in architecture and how, through designed buildings, the sacred is given the possibility to show itself.

Today, where the experience of the world in our everyday life is narrowed to the already-built and known environment, these numinous events are harder to experience. Space for us is homogenous and neutral; it rarely provides a region for the sacred to appear. We experience space in a continuous way: we go from our home to our office, driving our car, and rarely think about or experience the places we encounter on our way. Even when walking, usually in a faster pace than that natural for humans, we don't allow for special or different events to happen. We have forgotten that we live here, on Earth, under the skies and with the natural elements. No matter what religion, color or sex we are, that is our destiny; and someone, something or just evolution and time, meant it to be like that.

Places where the numinous experience still happens today are usually associated with sacred spaces. There are no rules for a place to be sacred: there are places where groups of peoples experience the sacred, like temples and churches; and there are places where the numinous shows just to one person. All this suggests how varied and powerful sacred places can be, but also that their real significance may not lie in the places themselves. There is an event; the appearance of a numinous experience, a feeling of being alive that is also there.

So, how do we create a sacred place? How do we eliminate this placelessness? How do we know if a place is sacred or not? As an architect, I want to create spaces that will enhance the possibilities of being in contact with more than just materials. I want to create meaningful spaces that will 'put us back on our place'. I have decided, as a first step, to try and understand sacred places in a better way and then to analyze a specific example and try to learn from it. This research is the first step of the way.

### **Sacred Places / Spaces**

We have all felt something special at different times in our lives. The wonder that looking at the ocean provokes, the astonishment of a sunset, the mysteries of the dark—they all make us wonder about our world and put us in contact with the 'wholly other'. We usually react to these situations and the place where they occurred. Whatever our reaction, we are bonded with that particular moment in time and space.

Topophilia, as defined by Yi-Fu Tuan (1974), is the "affective bond between people and place or setting" (Tuan, 1974). It is after we perceive these special forces that a specific place has that we are linked to it. The Egyptians sanctified the desert and built pyramids, the Mayans the beautiful coast and richness of Mexico and part of Central America, The Incas the glorious mountains on South America. It is this connection between place and person that is harder to find in contemporary cities. Today, the only places where we can experience the numinous events are what we consider sacred places. Churches and temples, the natural landscape, and very few other places still have that impact in our lives.

In order to establish what places are sacred we can use what Thomas Bender (Bender, 1991) proposes as the five kinds of sacred places:

- Physically special places with unusually powerful patterns of nature that draw us apart from our every day lives and into the awareness of primal forces.
- Places where our actions don't dominate.



- Special places enhanced by enlightened building.
- Places of important historical context.
- Places with special electromagnetic conditions.

I want to point out that the encounter with the numinous in a particular space is not restricted to either the number of persons who agree in its sacredness or a specific time when it is experienced. Everybody experiences the 'wholly other' sometime in their lives. What is important for us is that this experience is 'placed experience.' Therefore we may establish that this encounter is inseparably related to the place itself.

In examining the precise relationship between place and sacredness, Belden Lane (1988) proposes four axioms, or rules, to understand the characteristics of sacred places.

- First, *Sacred place is not chosen, it chooses*. Sacred place is a construction of the imagination that affirms the independence of the wholly other. One never decides that 'this' will be a sacred place. Individuals are tied to the Earth and thus derive their identities from specific items in the landscape.

In actual fact, the place is never chosen by man," says Eliade. "It is merely discovered by him; in other words, the sacred place in some way or another reveals itself to him (Lane, 1988, p. 17).

- Second, *Sacred place is ordinary place, ritually made extraordinary*. Sacred place is recognized as such because of certain ritual acts that are performed there, setting it as unique and setting it apart from the others. Its holiness resides not in certain inherent marks of external significance or obvious distinction. It is only declared to be different, discontinuous from its surroundings. The particular place may not be discerned by the uninitiated eye. The ordinary is projected to be extraordinary:

The Sacred place, in short, takes root in that which may form the substance of our daily lives, but is transformed by imagination to that which is awe-inspiring and grand (Lane, 1988, p. 25).

- Third, *Sacred place can be tread upon without being entered*. The recognition of a sacred place is existentially, not ontologically discerned; it is intimately related to states of consciousness. Simply moving into an allegedly sacred place does not necessarily make one present to it. Most sacred places are frequently the most ordinary ones entered anew with awe.

One can be there and yet not be there at the same time. Being bodily present is never identical with the fullness of being to which humans can be open in time and space. This is a basic paradox of existence (Lane, 1988, p. 25).

- Fourth, *The impulse of sacred place is both centripetal and centrifugal, local and universal*. One is recurrently driven to a quest for the sacred place, the center – a focus on the particular place of divine encounter - and then at other times one is driven out from the center with an awareness that the 'wholly other' exists and is not confined to one single space.

We long to be placed in the land of the holy, but on gaining possession of the sanctuary we come quickly to presume upon its guaranteed mystery –only then to be driven from it in search of yet another place, another center of meaning (Lane, 1988, p. 31).

Lane's axioms, even though produced for the landscape, are applicable to any sacred place. The encounter with the numinous is dependent on the place, no matter if it is natural or constructed.

One of the most helpful analyses of a specific sacred place is done by Linda Graber. In her *Wilderness as Sacred Space* (Graber, 1978) she proposes one axiom and two corollaries that are helpful to understand sacred spaces and why we need and construct them.

Graber's axiom states that "wilderness is a manifestation of the wholly other from man and it is to be valued by that reason" (Graber, 1978, p. 11). Though Graber focuses on landscapes, this axiom is obviously applicable for any space where the wholly other shows to any person. The first corollary extracted from it is that "one goes to wilderness in an attempt to transcend his ordinary world, self and manner of perception; in other words to have a religious experience" (Graber, 1978, p. 11). The second corollary says that "wilderness provides man with a model of perfection" (Graber, 1978, p. 13). These three statements help first, to understand why a sacred built space is usually based on the perception and understanding of the cosmos and, second, how and why they become sacred.

It is important to understand that individuals need to explain their existence; it is a central question of human existence. No two persons see the same reality and not two social groups make precisely the same evaluation of the environment, but every culture through history has developed a way to explain existence and the universe. In this regard, Graber makes an interesting point when she says:

A purely rational man is an abstraction never found in real life. Much of our existence is fed by impulses that come from the zone, which has been called the unconscious.

Historically, religions have provided outlets for unconscious energy, channeling into socially useful action through moral interpretations of sacred power (Graber, 1978, p. 7).

That is why modern man also seeks this numinous experience, just like his ancestors. But today one of the few ways he can do this is through the contemplation and respect of the wilderness – considered today's most important sacred space for many.

But Robert Mugerauer takes this same point and extends it to the architectural realm:

Our built environment participates in the sacred cosmos by homology. It is able to repeat the sacred patterns. That means some built things are able to help establish and hold on to the sacred. They can participate in, and thereby have meaning in, the homology between the human condition and the structure of reality (Mugerauer, 1994, p. 57).

And he adds an important point:

But, built things and natural things have this meaning only insofar as they oriented to the cosmic and display the sacred. According to Eliade, this orientation and display crucially depends on myth, because the paradigmatic sacred events themselves are held for us in myth (Mugerauer, 1994, p. 57).

So, according to Eliade and Mugerauer, we could conclude that one of the possibilities in the search for the gathering of sacredness in this world is achieved by the representation of the most important elements in human cosmological understanding, which, assembled and ritualized, will function as having the presence of the sacred here on Earth.

### **The Sacred and the Bribri House**

Architectural expressions of ancient civilizations are the best examples of sacred spaces. In earlier times, people were more in the presence of the 'wholly other' and thus their buildings were more meaningful and important than the practical constructions we build today. Temples, houses and public spaces were all sacred. But it was in their dwellings where people were continuously in the presence of the sacred. Bror Westman explains the importance of the house and the concept of home in the *Encyclopedia of Vernacular Architecture of the World*:

The home, therefore, seems to have a sort of dyadic structure. First, it is a physical systematization of the environment common to the society member's cultural and individual/group transformations of nature. These occur at several scales from the nearby landscape area including the cultural group's ecological niche through the village order to the house itself, to the individual's bed. Second, the home is a culturally learned conceptual frame within which transformations of human assimilation and accommodation occur... The home is therefore both a creative expression of people's culture and the frame within which people's experience of culture takes place, a process going on between the creation of this physical systematization of nature and the



experience of culture handed down from generation to generation (Westman, 1997. p.86).

Searching for a dwelling form that expresses the sacred in our time, I found the Bribri tribe's house type, which is one of the few known indigenous Costa Rican architectural legacies. This house type has expressed the sacred through years, but a change has occurred in the last decades. In exploring this changing sense of sacredness, the next chapters consider the Bribri house in greater detail –its architectural expression as it relates to sacredness and sacred space.

### **CHAPTER 3**

#### **THE BRIBRI HOUSE AS EXPERIENCED**

My interest in the Bribri houses started after my first visit to the Talamanca region. Walking through the roads of the town of Suretka, I wondered why, when ancient Bribri first built, they decided to build this conic structure. This was the first time I realized I was interested in the house type. Its materiality and its stimulation of all the senses caused a strong impression on me.

This chapter explores my own experience of the Bribri houses and then recounts what I learned talking with the Bribri. Even as an outsider, you can feel the change in the houses from older to newer; not just the physical change of the structure, but the perception the Bribri have of their houses today. The method where the researcher uses his firsthand experience of a phenomenon as a basis for examining its specific characteristics and qualities is called first-person phenomenological research, and it is mainly used throughout the first part of this chapter. A second part of the chapter uses existential phenomenological research, which is based on the experiences of individuals involved in the actual situation—in this case, the few Bribri I was able to interview during my visits to Talamanca. The chapter closes by exposing from both points of views the actual experience of building a conic house.

#### **My Experience of the Bribri Houses**

As I mentioned earlier, I first visited the Talamanca region because I was interested in the sensory experience of the Bribri house. The road trip takes around three hours from San Jose, Costa Rica's capital. You first arrive at Puerto Viejo, a small town populated by blacks and full of tourists because of its natural beauty. I stayed here for one night. The next day I traveled around the city, looking at the houses of the coast. They were of interest at the time and I did learn a lot from them. Their features would be of great interest in the days to follow, since this is the type of house that influenced the newer Talamancan rectangular-house form. I took pictures and talked to people, some of whom were really nice but some who were not. There are a lot of drug problems in the region, and many of these houses are used to sell drugs. The contact between the people of Puerto Viejo and the Bribri is one of the reasons why the Bribri changed many of their traditions. The Bribri economy, building techniques and cultural expressions have all been influenced by the strong contact with the Caribbean culture of Puerto Viejo and the large number of international tourists attracted by the beauty of the region.

Next day I decided to go to the Bribri town of Suretka, so I drove for thirty minutes into the mountains. The forest is very dense; light can just be seen through the openings in the canopy of the trees. It was windy. After driving fifteen minutes, the road changes from asphalt to gravel. You

then drive through a first Bribri village where the scenery is beautiful. You realize you are away from modern civilization. The views to the plantain plantations are amazing. The first thing you see is a small sign that welcomes you to the indigenous reserve, and after a mile from the sign, you find the first house to the right.



Fig 3.1. Recently built Bribri rectangular dwelling, Talamanca, Costa Rica, 2002. Photo: Luis Diego Quiros.

This was my first encounter with a rectangular house; it was not conic as I expected. But the rectangular-house form still had something special. The memories of my first experience of a Bribri house will last forever in my mind. As I wrote of this first encounter I realized how different and special these houses were. One of the first entries in my journal shows how important this first experience of a Bribri house was:

I wonder how the Bribis feel about their houses... they seem so happy and involved with their surroundings... their houses are clearly related to the site and the climate... the experience of the materials makes it so different from the experience of a modern building... I feel more in contact with the earth, with life... the smell of the suitea leave and the wood is very strong... and you can also smell the wet soil after it rained... I wonder if I can design a building today and cause this same reaction in the users... (Quiros, 2001)



Fig 3.2. Bribri mom and her son while interviewed, Talamanca, Costa Rica, 2001. Photo: Luis Diego Quiros.

during my visits.

The newer rectangular Bribri houses can be found along the main road, separated one from the other by about a five-minute walk. Some families have built two or three dwellings next to one another, but this specific situation is not very common. The houses are built far from the road (usually about 100 meters) and closer to the dense forest, where the noise of cars is less and there is a closer contact with nature. Most Bribri still walk to where they need to go; some prefer



Fig 3.3. Light inside one of the rooms of a rectangular Bribri House, Talamanca, Costa Rica, 2002. Photo: Luis Diego Quiros.

It was interesting to get out of the city and see these people living the way they do, influenced by modern society and technology, but still in the past. Seeing people still adding and multiplying with simple calculators and not accepting credit cards, still cooking with fire ovens, still raising pigs to eat and having chicken for their everyday breakfast was very different. And this is probably what made this first trip so interesting: for me it was not just a cultural and architectural experience, it was a way of learning from people.

During my research on the site, I visited more than fifteen houses. All of them but one were rectangular; the exception was circular and had a conic roof. The Bribri told me that in other parts of the region—deep in the mountains where the influence of other cultures is not yet so strong—they still build traditional conic houses, but I never saw one

to ride their bikes and a few, own cars.

Regarding the architecture, I was very surprised with how people, like many who talked to me, still knew the building techniques and meanings. The Bribri still seem to like the place they live in regardless of the type of housing modern societies advertise as better dwellings. The experience of being in the

house is very powerful. At the time of my first visit, I was interested in the sensory experience of architecture, and being inside and around these houses was amazing.



Fig 3.4. The floor of a rectangular Bribri house, made out of *suíta*—palm-trunk, is not rigid; it moves as one walks over it, Talamanca, Costa Rica, 2001. Photo: Luis Diego Quiros.

The materials are all natural, cut and assembled together by the Bribri. The smell of the wood with the rain, the touch of the bamboo and the palm of the roof, the sound this palm makes when the wind blows—all are experiences that seemed forgotten by modern man. We are no longer in contact with these natural events. The floor is not as rigid as in a modern building—every step you take you feel it. You are aware of the materiality of the building at all times. The gaps between the palms or the wood let rays of light come into the inside, but overall it is a very dark interior.

The light comes into the interior in a very emotive way—it is almost like being under the canopy of a tree. I wondered if these people tried to emulate the mood of the outside in the inside. It was clear to me at the time that the Bribis loved their houses not because of how much they are or how big they are, but because of how meaningful and comfortable they are.



Fig 3.5. The kitchen inside a Bribri rectangular house, Talamanca, Costa Rica, 2001. Photo: Luis Diego Quiros.

In some of the houses, the kitchen is close to the house. In others it is separated. The smell of the food and all the tools in the kitchen also make the experience different. You can smell the wood burning, and in some cases, where the fire was not burning, you can smell the typical smell of burned wood and food. Old pots, used probably for everything and, dirty, but at the same time calling your attention and making you want to taste their food. The Bribis eat plantains a lot, a fact that told me they still gather some of what they eat. There is a little store close to the town where they can also buy things.



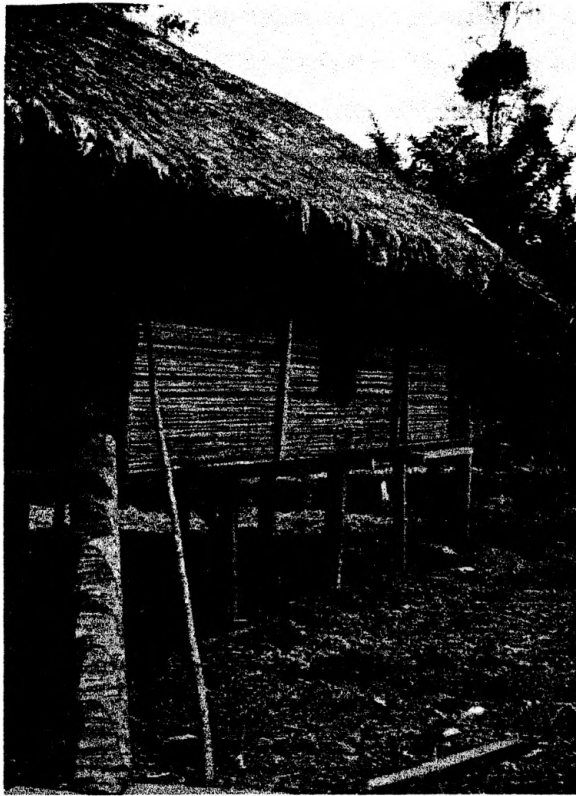


Fig 3.6. Traditional stairs used to climb into a rectangular Bribri house, Talamanca, Costa Rica, 2001. Photo: Luis Diego Quiros.

The experience of entering the house is also different from that of modern houses. Most Bribri houses don't have stairs. You have to climb up a tree branch that has cuts in it so you can put your foot horizontally. The concept of 'stairs' as we understand it, probably does not exist. In some houses you could tell the influence of the Caribbean because the houses were raised up on pillars. This makes you aware of going up and down, and the fact that you are elevated over the site also makes you be more in contact with the surroundings.

I noticed that most of the new rectangular houses are divided into four main areas: an outdoor larger room, two enclosed rooms, and the kitchen. As mentioned before, the kitchen sometimes is built apart from the main structure. The two enclosed spaces are usually used as bedrooms; the parents sleep

in one and the children in the other. But the Bribri spent most of the day in the big outdoor space of the house. They hang hammocks and do their chores in this open room.

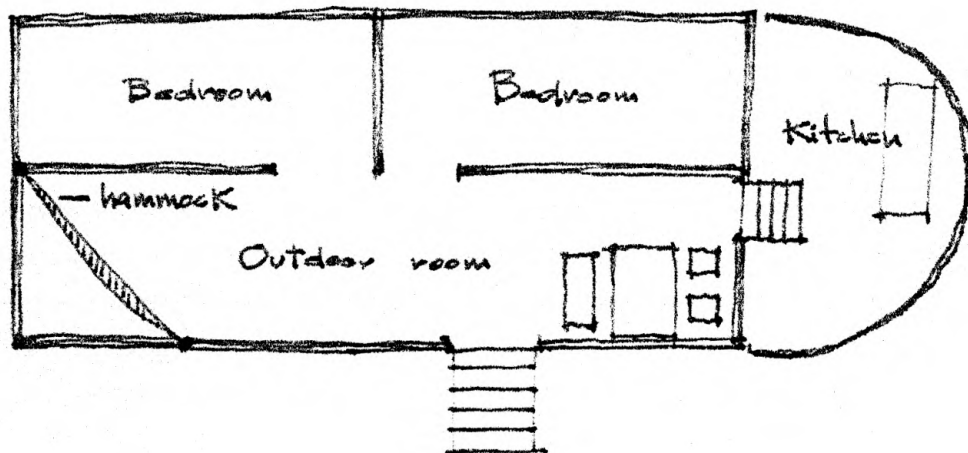


Fig 3.7. Sketch of a typical rectangular house floor plan, Talamanca, Costa Rica, 2001. Based on author's field observations, summer 2001.

Another issue that came to my attention is how obvious and close the relationship between person, house and landscape is. The Bribri build their houses with materials found within their surrounding environment. They still gather some of their food, they cook with fire, and they don't need electricity. There is no technological invention used by modern man that the Bribri consider as an everyday necessity.

This more natural way of life keeps them in closer contact with their environment and their universe. It also makes them avoid any contact with foreigners like me, whom they consider to be harmful and full of bad intentions. I discovered how hard it was to talk to the Bribri on my first visit. They are shy and they guard their culture very well. They have been taught to be defensive; they did not want to lose anything else to the 'white man'. My first experience as an outsider was limited. Nobody wanted to talk to me. As I tried to approach a woman inside a house, I asked:

- *Tell me something: who built this house?*
- *My uncle*
- *And these other houses?*
- *Others...*

Noticing her tone was not very inviting, I tried to show her my interest in the house,

- *What's behind the walls? The kitchen? Can I come in?*
- *No*
- *Why not?*
- *Just no.*
- *Well... OK... thanks anyways...*

With time I learned why the Bribri are so closed. Apparently, and as is happening all around the world, the Costa Rican government, international corporations, and other cultures have been trying to steal their lands and change their traditions. These problems would come up in later interviews and would come to be an important factor in the house phenomenon and the loss of Bribri traditions.

But every time I went back and visited the houses and the people, some of them came to know of my interests and became more friendly. The Bribri told me stories about their houses. Every time I asked them something about the building process, they always explained the creation of their universe and explained how the house was a representation of the universe. They always explained their beliefs and how they live the everyday. The houses did seem to be important for them. The next section of this chapter explores my understanding as gained through interviewing Bribri people about their houses.

## My Experience of Interacting With and Speaking to the Bribri

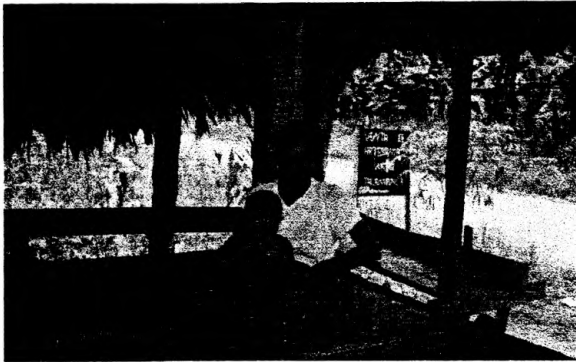


Fig 3.8. Bribri mother and her child during an interview, Talamanca, Costa Rica, 2002. Photo: Luis Diego Quiros.



Fig 3.9. Bribri family in large open outdoor space while being interviewed, Talamanca, Costa Rica, 2001. Photo: Luis Diego Quiros.

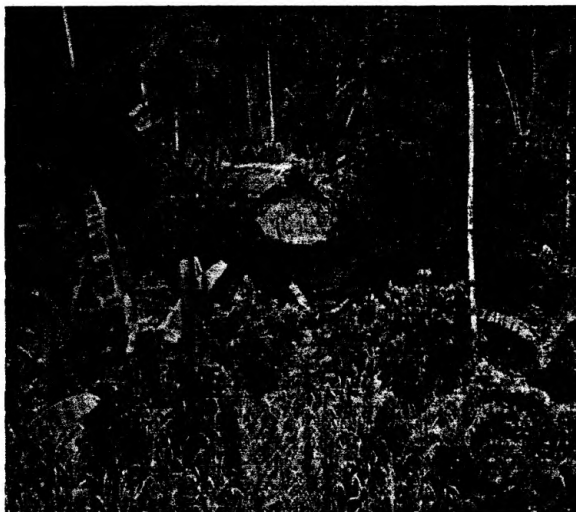


Fig 3.10. Picture of a Bribri house from the main road, Talamanca, Costa Rica, 2001. Photo: Luis Diego Quiros.

As I experienced the Bribri house by myself, I wondered what and how the Bribri themselves felt about it. I talked to the houses' dwellers to better understand what their experience was. I interviewed nine house owners and spoke with groups of people gathered in public places. The existential phenomenological research, which is based on the experiences of individuals involved in the actual situation, is the method this second part of chapter 3 uses to discuss what I learned from talking to the Bribri.

At first, none of the Bribri I tried to talk to would share their experience with me. I tried to interview everybody I met. But they still considered me an outsider. So, I began at a recently-built rectangular house whose owners sold handicrafts. They later introduced me to other Bribri and their families. By the end of the research, I had talked to several Bribri – including children, men and women- and more than fifteen house owners. The dwellings of the people I interviewed were all found close the main road, so I was also able to see and experience their houses. This made it possible for me to better understand what the Bribri told me.

As the Bribri started trusting me, I discovered more interesting situations that helped me to realize that the houses were still meaningful for them, but that there was a lack of understanding of all the house symbolism. I



realized their ties to the house type were more due to tradition and living standards than to how sacred the houses still were. Dona Rosa, an old lady just like many in the tribe, shared her understanding of the tradition of the house in my first interview with her. Dona Rosa's insightful comments brought to light many of the problems as well as the way most Bribis understand their built world today. It was hard to communicate with her because of her Spanish, but her few words said a lot more.

As I spoke to her, Dona Rosa expressed the affection she feels for her house, because, as she explained, "God left it for us to live in... and here". She explained how she built the house mostly by herself and how she walked up into the mountains to find building materials. She proudly described the structural characteristics of her circular dwelling and then added: "[the circular form]... keeps everything firm... the house doesn't move with earthquakes, it's firm..."



Fig 3.11. Newer rectangular Bribri house built next to one of the concrete-government built houses, Talamanca, Costa Rica, 2001. Photo: Luis Diego Quiros.

Through Dona Rosa's interview, I also learned about one interesting phenomenon that took place a few years ago in the region and that shows there is still something special about the conic and rectangular houses. The government, in one of their attempts to gain more votes in the Indigenous Reserve of the Lower Talamanca, had offered to build new housing for the Bribis. The final project involved various concrete houses with corrugated metal roofs (see figure 3.11). Many of the Bribis could not live in these houses. They complained that they were too hot and did not satisfy their personal beliefs. As a result, they rebuilt their dwellings as their ancestors did: with natural materials. But the contact with the Caribbean black culture and modern society

influenced the form of the new houses—they were now rectangular. The Bribri felt, though, that these houses were still important and meaningful to them.

But after my first visit to the Bribri, I still did not understand why the Bribri build differently now. And why they did not like the government's houses. Was it because the governmental housing solution did not solve climatic, traditional and cultural issues? Or was it because the houses were still sacred for them? If sacred, what type of house would they build? Would that include rituals and meanings? Or would it be just another functional solution?

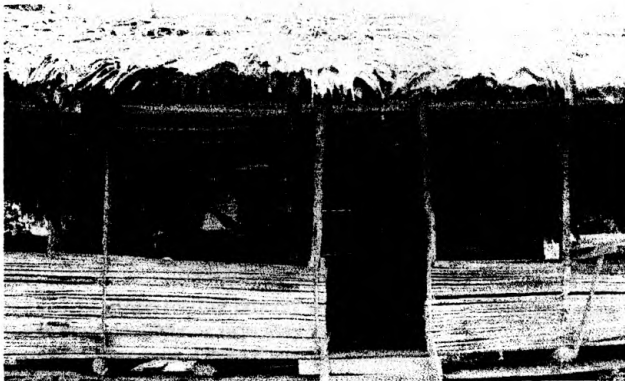


Fig 3.12. New rectangular Bribri house used to sell handcrafts, Talamanca, Costa Rica, 2002. Photo: Luis Diego Quiros.



Fig 3.13. Bribri child carrying palm leaves—suíta, as the Bribri call it—used to build the roof of rectangular houses, Talamanca, Costa Rica, 2002. Photo: Luis Diego Quiros.

I visited the region various other times. In every visit, I could see the changes the outside influences caused on the Bribri culture. Almost a year after my first contact, I had the opportunity to talk to another group of Bribri who were selling the crafts they produced. They seemed willing to share more information, but none of them agreed to be either taped or recorded. This time I could see their need for income and the increase in their necessities. The influence of capitalism and the fact that they discovered how to make money from tourists were also clearer this time. The impact of the contact with other cultures was changing their traditions very fast.

The Bribri that did not know my intentions were still indifferent to me. When I first entered the rectangular house where they sold traditional objects, I asked if I could

ask them some questions. Their answer was a plain “those who buy can ask questions and take pictures, those who don’t, we’d rather ask them not to...” Their traditions are now worth money, I thought. It was a clear sign of a loss of priorities in their culture. When I asked them about the reason why they don’t build conic houses anymore, they responded: “because it is too much work and we need more materials to build them than the quantity we need to build the rectangular

house... it is very hard nowadays to find palm and *suita*..." Their answers showed that the house was still important, but they did not care for them as much as they did in earlier times.



Fig 3.14. Bribri mother proudly showing her newborn daughter—a sign they trusted me more, Talamanca, Costa Rica, 2002. Photo: Luis Diego Quiros.

I interviewed more Bribri and spent more time in the region. Some of the things they told me were similar to what I had read and to what the builders of the other houses had told me. A group of Bribri, including their leaders, were trying to teach their traditions again, they explained. But I felt their answers were not from the heart. Some of their answers seemed as if they had been memorized in school. This made me wonder how true they kept to their traditions and if a retrieval of their lost values was possible.

This time, the Bribri I spoke to described more thoroughly the conic sacred house. They explained that the houses used to be bigger and with dust floors, rather than the elevated floor of the rectangular house made of palm. The Bribri also described the process of cutting the palms in the forest and how they put them over fire so smoke seals them and they last longer. They talked about the objects in the house and what they used them for: the bow and arrow to kill animals (I had to buy one of this in order for them to talk to me), the coconut halves to drink water, the hammocks to sleep and the bags to carry what they collect. They explained that to build a conic house, which was also bigger and taller than the rectangular one, they worked a full month. They first get together and go to the forest to gather the materials. They bring them down the mountain, treat them and then get together again to build the house. The way they lived in conic houses was different. They used to sleep all together, but now they have separated the house in two rooms and sometimes a kitchen to the side. Women use to go with men for the collection of materials, but they don't anymore because the women are less able to do the job. Pregnant women are believed to bring bad luck, they told me.

In this visit, I discovered many of the things that I later corroborated with other authors and that helped me reach a conclusion in my research. I started to better understand the changes the houses and the people has passed through in the last several years, and how the loss of the sacred was taking place.

## Building a Bribri House for a Museum Exhibit

While I was working on this research, I was invited by Costa Rican architect Andres Brenes to the construction of half a conic house for a future exhibition in the Museum of Gold in San Jose, Costa Rica's capital. Brenes' architecture firm had been hired by the government to design a permanent exhibit in that museum. It was decided by museum staff that one of the main attractions of this exhibit would be a Bribri conic house. During this construction experience, I got to talk to the Bribri builders who were brought from Talamanca to the museum to do the construction. After observing this building process and based on this experience, I had to conclude that the construction of these houses is no longer a sacred process.



Fig 3.15. The three Bribri builders explain the technical process of building a conic house, San Jose, Costa Rica, 2002. Photo: Luis Diego Quiros.

The first day I met the Bribri builders, who explained that "In building a conic house, the initial step is to gather the materials needed." These men were affable and showed me the materials they had brought from the mountains. The three basic materials the Bribri use to build their houses are wood, vine and palm leaves (see table 3.1). The palms were still green and some of them were already aging and taking on the brown color of old palms. The men had cut the wood poles for the structure and they

also cut what they call *bejuco*—the vine they use to tie every part of the house together. They were going to take everything to the museum and start building the house the next day.

The building process started early next morning at the museum. The first thing that became clear to me was that these men still possessed the technical skills necessary to build the house. However, I noticed there were no rituals performed at the beginning as I expected, and nothing done regarding the possible sacredness of this 'staged sacred house'. The only thing that seemed to me respectful during the process was that the men requested that I not ask them questions while they were working. They explained that they would answer my questions after their work was done. They did not allow me to tape the conversations or to videotape the process. But it was clear that the process did not have any meaningful order or symbolism.

Some of the things the Bribri builders did explain at the beginning of the building process were technical issues like how they tie the palms and the names and use of the materials. It appeared





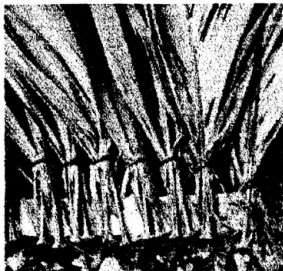

Element in the Bribri House	Natural Material (scientific name)	Bribri Name	Process and Use	Picture
Main columns	Wood trunks ( <i>socratea durissima</i> )	<i>Chonta</i>	Wood for the central post and the columns on the circumference is obtained from the forest. The Bribri cut it on full moon, then peel the outer layer, dry it and put it over smoke so that insects can't infest it.	
Transverse Beams	Wood beams ( <i>phitecolobium pseudotamarindus</i> )	<i>Casha or Madera Rolliza</i>	Same process as with the main columns but are not peeled: cut on full moon, smoked and dried before cut into halves, which are then tied to provide the flexibility and length for the total circumference.	
Roof Cover	Palm leaves ( <i>genoma congesta</i> )	<i>Suita</i>	Leaves are cut and tied to a long wood pole to form a panel, which are then smoked and tied to the main wood structure.	
Joints	Vine ( <i>anthurium scandens</i> )	<i>Bejuco Real</i>	Strong vine obtained from the forest which acts like a wire and is used for binding all construction joints.	

Table 3.1. Materials used for the construction of half a conic house. Based on author's field observations, summer 2002.

to me they were going to be in charge of the construction, but I also noticed that the architect—who was not an expert on the Bribri house type—played an active role in the construction and that the builders followed his directions rather than really involving themselves in the building process. This made me wonder how much respect they still have for their traditions. And even

though I thought this was happening just then because the house was not a 'real' house but a representative structure for a museum, the builders later told me they no longer performed rituals or any meaningful ceremony. They said that a party is thrown once the house is finished, but nowadays it is more of a social event than a sacred ritual.



Fig 3.16. One of the Bribri builders shows how to tie the *suíta* panels to the main structure, San Jose, Costa Rica, 2002. Photo: Luis Diego Quiros.

So far, the builders had just shown me their technical skills. But as they continued building, I still wondered why construction did not seem sacred to me. After the work was finished, I asked them about the house and its construction. Table 3.2 describes my effort to document the stages in building this half conic house as I understood the process through my participation and observations. Later The Bribri builders claimed that these stages were the basic steps in the building process of any traditional Bribri conic house.

As indicated in the table, the construction of the conic house at the museum began by first digging eight poles on an orthogonal form around a central post. If needed, and depending on the size of the house, additional secondary columns are built between these eight posts. These secondary columns are usually thinner. In the exhibit house, the Bribri builders had to nail the main columns to the museum's existing structure. They nailed ten wood trunks—all of the same thickness—to the floor and the ceiling.

Once the main columns were raised, they were tied at the highest point, where they intersected. The conic form obtained was then divided into four parts, which were measured so that they could be covered by the length of a palm leave, or *suíta*, as the Bribri call it. I observed that these measures were made based on the men's use of arm length rather than measuring tools. For the exhibit house, the Bribri builders had only the height of the ceiling to work with, thus they divided the total height in equal distances measured with half their arms. No difference was made between divisions. In total, they divided the total height into seven parts.

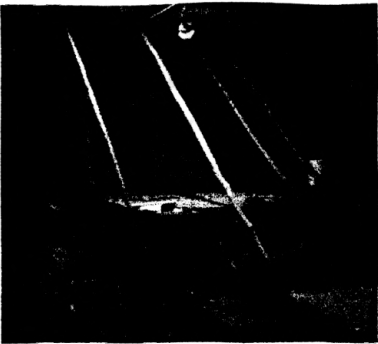
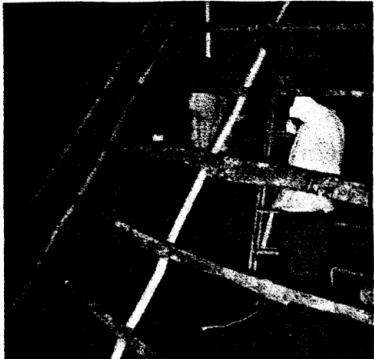

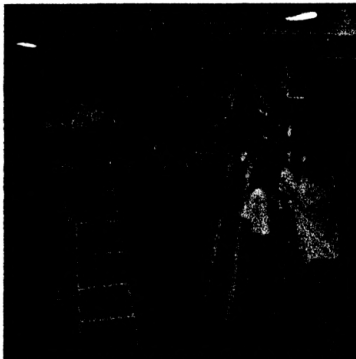
Stage	Description	Pictures
1	The main posts were nailed on both their ends to the existing structure of the museum, forming a half circle. No rituals or ceremonies were performed.	
2	The transversal beams ( <i>cashá</i> ) were tied with natural vine wires ( <i>bejuco real</i> ) to the main structure, dividing it into different sections.	
3	The panels made of leaves ( <i>suita</i> ) were tied to the transversal beams with natural vine wire ( <i>bejuco real</i> ).	
4	Once the structure was partially covered, an overhang roof was built at the entrance. This roof was hung from the existing ceiling.	

Table 3.2. The building process of half a conic house, Museum of Gold, San Jose, Costa Rica, Summer 2002. Based on author's field observations.

Next, the transverse beams were tied to the main columns using *bejuco real*, a vine that is used as the rope to tie every element in the house. Nothing was supposed to be nailed, since every joint is a knot. In the museum exhibit, however, they had to nail parts of the structure because of safety regulations in the museum and for ease of construction. Every knot was tied in an "X" form.

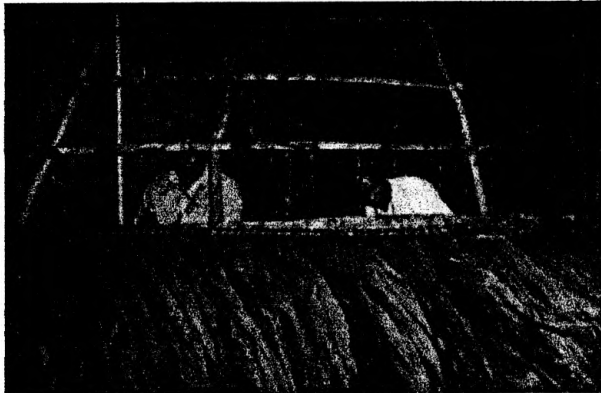


Fig 3.17. Bribri builders tie the *suita* panels to the main structure. In this process a lot of materials were wasted, San Jose, Costa Rica, 2002. Photo: Luis Diego Quiros.

When the basic conic structure was finished, the men built the cover or enclosure. In this third stage, palm leaves or *suita* panels, were tied to the transverse beams starting from the bottom.

The only opening was the main entrance. Once the conic house was finished, the last step was to build a roof that covered this entrance. This roof is usually built with two columns on the outside holding two beams tied to the main structure, but in the

exhibition case, the builders hung the roof from the museum's ceiling.

As I interviewed the Bribri builders after they finished the house, they first explained historical facts about the conic structures. One thing they made clear was that, in the past, these houses were bigger. They used to have a diameter of at least forty meters (120 feet) and sometimes they were twice as tall (as eighty meters). They were larger because families used to live and sleep together. Today, as the men explained, many traditions have changed. "Nowadays", they said, "the conic house type is harder to build and the materials are harder to find. It would take us a lot of time and energy. Plus, finding the resources is really hard" (Quiros, 2002).

After talking to the Bribri builders once they were finished constructing, I discovered that they did not build the exhibition house following traditional process or techniques. I questioned them on the subject. "In our land"—as they called Talamanca—"we would do things differently," they explained. First, they would choose the place. It has to be flat. Then, they would measure the circle with a long *bejuco* (a type of vine) and calculate the materials they need so they could go and find them in the forest. They would ask their God – Sibú – for his permission to cut these materials from his Earth—they would sing and dance—and then, after three days, they would go up into the mountains to work. For a big house, it could take the Bribri up to fifteen days in the



forest to get all the materials. The men said they usually cut materials at full moon, and each individual has his own task. Pregnant women are not allowed to go because they are believed to be sick.

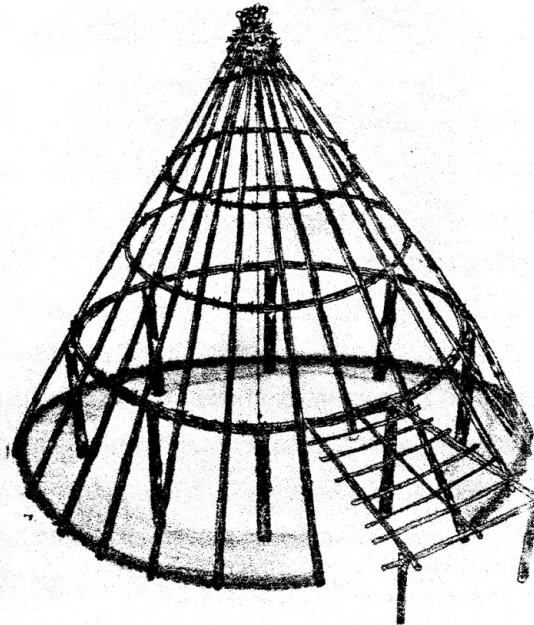


Fig. 3.18. Traditional conic structure. Once the main columns are dig into the soil, the transverse beams are tied. The *suita* panels are then tied to the structure to form the enclosure. As presented by Fernando Gonzalez and Gonzalez, p. 39, 2000.

The men next explained that, once the materials are gathered, the owner would make sure everything he needs is there and a group of Bribri men would begin building the panels of *suita*. They would let them dry in the sun and smoke them to protect them against the insects. They would then dig the main columns, tie them at the top and then tie the transverse beams. Once everything is ready they would begin to tie these *suita* panels to the main structure.

The builders explained that once the house is built, the Bribri would celebrate and dance, asking Sibú to bless their home and to provide good crops. They don't paint anything on the poles as some tribes do, the men explained.

The Bribri builders told me that in the past, there were three main persons involved in the process of building a sacred house. These persons had very important builder roles and were the ones who knew about the traditions. These are the *awa*—medicine masters that communicate with *Cibú*; the *bakala*—singers of special celebration songs; and the *tsokol*—singers of funerary songs. But the Bribri builders also explained that these roles no longer exist. In the past the men in these roles were the ones in charge of explaining and teaching the traditions, but today nobody has that responsibility because much of the knowledge has been lost.

Many other things that also called my attention while the men were building the museum house suggested that not only the carriers of the tradition were lost, but that the sacred aspect of the ritual of building was also forgotten. It was clear to me that the men no longer practiced their traditions.

For example, when telling me about the orientation of the house, one of the builders clearly said: “the door faces where the sun comes out... the north”. I wondered what this meant because his Spanish was good. I don’t know if it was just a slip of the tongue, or that he understood the north to be the direction where the sun comes out. This told me that the tradition was not practiced often and that the knowledge and meaning of the orientation of the house was either wrong or disrespected.

Another event that made me better realize the loss of sacredness in the building process was when I asked the men why they build rectangular houses today. Their answer was “everything changes, everything becomes modern.” This affirmation made the phenomenon clearer to me. Modern profane society’s values have taken control of their traditions.

The three Bribri builders also mentioned that they never wasted materials and that everything was used. They believed everything had a life of its own and they never cut anything after they get back from the mountain. If they have to overlap things to reach the length, they will do it rather than cutting a living being. But, in the case of the conic exhibition house, waste did not seem to matter. They would do what the architect told them to do, and they cut both palms and vines rather than use overlapping.

### **Unanswered Questions**

At the end of the process, I had learned the main steps of how to build a conic house. I learned something of the Bribri building techniques and construction details. And for the first time in my research, I had the experience of being inside a conic house. This made me understand that, from the interior, the leaves’ enclosure and the knots of the joints could be experienced as the sky and the stars. The strong smell of suitea leaves and wood made you feel as if you were in the forest. It was a very different experience—out of the ordinary. I could then see clearly that these houses put you in contact with the natural world.

But even though I had learned more about the house from the Bribri Builders and experienced the conic structure from the inside, the concept of the house’s sacredness was still not clear to me. I still did not totally understand why the house was sacred or what made it sacred. Was it the rituals? the building process? what about how meaningful it was supposed to be? why did it then change its form from conic to rectangular?

Based on these issues, the next chapter attempts to answer these questions in more depth by drawing largely on the research of other scholars already reviewed briefly in chapter one. I attempt to answer three key questions:

- First, what made this houses sacred? It seemed to me the houses were not as meaningful for the Bribri builders anymore, and I wanted to know why.
- Second, was the building process important? While in the museum, the Bribri builders did not seem to follow any kind of ritual order—they were just building an ordinary structure—and I wanted to discover if and how the process of construction was related to the sacredness and meaning of the house.
- Third, why has the form of the house changed over time from conic to rectangular? I wanted to know if the new rectangular dwellings are as meaningful for the Bribri as the older conic houses or and if they still keep the sacred character.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **THE TALAMANCA HOUSE: MEANINGS AND SYMBOLISM**

As explained at the end of the last chapter, I now want to answer three key questions, drawing on information from the research literature surveyed in chapter 1:

- 1) why and how are the Bribri houses sacred?
- 2) how are the building process and the houses' elements related to the sacredness and meaning of the Bribri house?
- 3) why over historical time has the form of the Bribri dwelling changed from conic to rectangular?

My approach in this chapter involves hermeneutical phenomenology in that I use scholarly accounts about the Bribri as a 'written' text out of which I draw answers to my three questions.

#### **1. Why and how are the traditional Bribri houses sacred?**

To answer this first question, we must examine accounts in the Bribri research literature that present the Bribri traditional creation myths and how they relate to the construction of a conic house. The most complete accounts of these topics can be found in the works of Bozzoli (1979), Palmer (1991), Ferreto (1985), Gonzalez and Gonzalez (2000) and Jara (1997). All authors present the same myth of how the Bribis believe the universe was created.

Gonzalez and Gonzalez (2000) explain how the Bribis believe in the god *Cibu*, who created the world—earth. As the authors narrate:

*Cibu* came from *awa*, his father, who's the stone that exists since the beginnings of time. *Cibu's* uncles, worried that the new child was going to displace them from their thrones, decided to kill him. Knowing their bad intentions, *Cibu's* parents decided to move away and crossed four upper layers of the universe. It is in this fourth layer where *Cibu* grows up. Years later, once grown up, *Cibu* decided to come again to the first layer, that in time would become the human universe (Gonzalez and Gonzalez 2000).

The next important event in the Bribri myth of creation is the making of the earth and humans. As Palmer (1991) narrates in this translation of a Bribri myth, earth was created when a child's blood was spilled over the rocky earth:

Before the indigenous people were created, the tapir already existed. *Cibu* created the sky and earth, but the earth was only rock. *Cibu* wanted to bring corn seeds to the earth to plant them, but how would they germinate if there was no soil?

In a very distant place, on another planet, there lived a tapir family. They were a grandmother, a son, two daughters and a little granddaughter. *Cibu* asked a bat to fly to that place and suck the blood of the little girl-tapir, because he wanted to make an experiment. The bat did as he was beckoned and when he returned to this world, he defecated on the rocks. A few days later, the first trees began to sprout from that place.

*Cibu* realized that his experiment to make soil was working, so he sent the bat a second time to suck the blood of the little girl-tapir. The bat returned and defecated again on the rocks, and more trees grew...

So *Cibu* decided to go in person and he talked to them like this;

-Let's go, let's go

But the mother said "No, no. We don't have the proper clothes, and this little girl is too heavy. I can't even lift her. Only the grandmother can carry her."

So *Cibu* talked to grandmother, and he said "Let's go the place of seeds. I am going to make a big party. Bring the little girl so she can be cured..." *Cibu* also promised that when he returned, he would bring them presents. And so it was...

...Finally they decided to go to the party...

When they arrived on the earth and got to the party, *Cibu* called the mother of the little girl-tapir and said,

"Cousin, come make chocolate for us to drink."

When the dancing started, *Cibu* invited the grandmother tapir to dance, but the grandmother said,

"No, I can't dance, the little girl weighs too much."

But *Cibu* told her that she must dance for the little girl to get well, and he offered a strap of *mastate* so she could tie the child to her back.

The dance began, with the people forming a great circle, They danced and danced, one, two, three, four rounds, and *taz!* The *mastate* straps burst and the little girl-tapir fell to the ground, and thousands of feet trampled her. The body of the little girl was mashed over the rocky earth. And that is how *Cibu* made the soil from the flesh and blood of the tapir. Now *Cibu* could plant his corn seeds. That is how he made the earth fertile for the people (Palmer, 1991, p. 34).

Once the earth was finished, *Cibu* decided to create people—and he made them from corn seeds:

*Cibu* made the first indigenous people from seeds of corn. He brought the seeds from a place he called *sulakaska*, which means the place of destiny. From there, *Cibu* brought corn seeds of all different colors: black, white, yellow and purple. That is why indigenous people have different skin colors and tones. *Cibu* brought the seeds to this world by night (Palmer, 1991, p.31).

In the work by Gonzalez and Gonzalez (2000), an interesting relationship between the Bribri house and the symbol of a basket is explored. It is clearly established by Bribri house builder



Gregorio Soto, when he describes the meaning of the enclosure of the house which is built with leaves:

When Cibu made us, at the beginning he brought us from corn seeds he carried in a basket wrapped with leaves, and so we live 'wrapped' by leaves (Gonzalez, 1989, video).

The Bribis use baskets for their everyday lives and they carry the seeds they grow in these baskets. The house in this sense is called upon to carry the 'human seeds'. This idea of the house as a basket that holds the corn seeds from which where humans were made and its relation the sacredness of the house is explored in depth by Gonzalez and Gonzalez (2000) when he explains the ritual that takes place after the house construction has finished:

A big *canasta* full of corn seeds of different colors, the *chaman* takes and seeds, before the celebration is over, the first pairs of corn seeds, men and women who were the progenitors of the first eight tribes. These eight tribes are also represented by the eight posts that sustained the traditional conic houses. They also represent the pillars of the universe. Thus, eight is the mystical and magical number for the *Bribis* and *Cabecares*: eight pillars have the house of *Cibu*, eight are the spaces and times of the universe, the *nopadcu* and its evolution happens in eight stages... The interior of the house is a comfortable, fresh and semi-dark mood, gives the sensation of amplitude and serenity, it represents the mother's uterus. Towards the center, an eternal-three logged fire doesn't just provide a place to cook, but the smoke helps preserve the meat, repels insects and even helps preserve the palm roof for more than twenty years. Around, the *hammocks* and beds provide the only needs for life (Gonzalez, 1989, video).

As Gonzalez and Gonzalez (2000) explain, many tribes around the world imagine the sky as something that covers and surrounds them. For the Bribri, the conic enclosure of their houses represents the sky. "*Cibu* told us that we should live happily inside the house he created for us and that we should build houses that were the same as the one he built for us: on top of the soil, rounded and covered", explains a Bribri to Gonzalez. "Every knot that is made, every point where the main posts and rings are tied together, represents a star in the sky. The inside of the house is very dark, it reminds us of the night. There are no windows or contact with the outside but the only door" (Gonzalez, 1989, video)

Different versions of this myth are found throughout the literature reviewed, but they all have very similar content. It is in relation to this myth and the universe created by god *Cibu* that the Bribis build their traditional conic houses. The construction process of these conic dwellings and the symbolism their various parts carry are very meaningful for the Bribis. As Gonzalez and Gonzalez points out above, the building process is related and compared to the story of the creation of the universe and the different columns and beams forming the house also symbolize natural and cosmological elements found in Bribri beliefs. As an old shaman explains, the Bribis believe their houses represent the world *Cibu* created for them:

The old house signifies that *Cibu* gave the order that *Bribris* should live in conic houses. To protect the person from illness it should have just one entrance and it is a symbol of where *Cibu* made the house, the world... that's what *Cibu* ordered to the *Bribris* (Gonzalez, 1989, video).

The fact that the house represents the universe is what makes it sacred. It gives the structure a meaning that goes beyond earthly things and puts the Bribri individual in contact with the 'wholly other'—with what they believe is sacred. As Eliade explains:

Simple contemplation of the celestial vault already provokes a religious experience. The sky shows itself to be infinite, transcendent. It is pre-eminently the 'wholly other' than the little represented by man and his environment. Transcendence is revealed by simple awareness of infinite height (Eliade, 195, p.118).

Gonzalez and Gonzalez (2000) also share this position as he explains why, based on the meaning and symbolism shared between the conic structure and the Bribris' beliefs and vision of the universe, the conic dwelling type acquires its sacredness:

The Bribris, as many other indigenous tribes, have a complex real-magic concept of the universe. Their first mega structure [the conic house] contains most of the symbols related to their cosmovision, including the natural and social laws that govern their society... The traditional conic dwelling, and even the dwelling types that have gone through a change, are living metaphors of the cosmos. They physically represent myths. (Gonzalez and Gonzalez, 2000, p. 15).

Thus, it is when the conic structure is built to represent the universe—created by a being that is not human—that it acquires its sacred character. The house is now an object that carries the presence of something that does not belong to the earthly world. It represents the 'being here', on earth, of the 'wholly other', and thus, becomes sacred.

In comparing these researcher's accounts of the sacredness in the Bribri houses to my experience described in chapter 3, it seems to me that, today, the sacred meaning is largely lost. The reason to build a house has changed from trying to represent the universe and thus being in contact with *Cibu* to just a necessity for shelter. This change of understanding the building process made the Bribris change from building a conic house to the new rectangular dwelling. The former was meaningful and sacred, while the latter suggests a change of principles to simplify construction but loose sight of the Bribri beliefs and cosmology.

## **2. How are the building process and the houses' elements related to the sacredness and meaning of a Bribri house?**

The fact that, with the passing of time, the conic Bribri house evolved into a rectangular dwelling is proof of the adaptations and changes it has gone through. The sacredness of the conic house is in part given by the meaning and symbolism of its elements and form, which all relate to the Bribri cosmological beliefs. It is clear that the rectangular form does not share this meaning. So, besides the form, what else could give properties of sacredness to this conic structure?

As mentioned before, the most important study of the conic Bribri house is by Gonzalez and Gonzalez (2000). In their *The Cosmic Talamancan House*, they describe the construction process and analyze the meaning of the elements that form the house. Other studies like Gabb (1880) and Golliher (1977) deal with specific topics and are not as detailed as the Gonzalez' book. Drawing on Gonzalez' work, I intend to answer the second question proposed: how are the building process and the houses' elements related to the sacredness and meaning of a Bribri house? I also intend to compare the traditional building process of a sacred Bribri house to the construction of the conic exhibit dwelling described in chapter 3 (see table 3.2). This comparison will help understand and clarify the differences between a sacred process and a not so sacred, or profane process.

Table 4.1 describes my understanding of the traditional construction process of a Bribri sacred conic house based on how Gonzalez describes it. According to Gonzalez, the first step in building these houses was to find the site:

The place where the house is to be built, and as part of its sacredness, has to be chosen because of its characteristics. The site has to be planar and stable, usually on top of a hill so that the visual domain is bigger, close to a water source and protected against the wind. No trees should be close because they can fall and destroy the house and it has to be easily accessible because the materials are brought by hand from the forest (Gonzalez and Gonzalez 2000, p. 26).

Once the site was found, the dimensions were decided based upon the owner's knowledge on how many people were going to live in the house. "In the past, various families used to live together, nowadays families live by themselves," explains Gonzalez (2000, p. 27). Gonzalez then suggests that the construction process started with the cleaning of the site where the house was going to be built. "The owner invites friends and family to help with every step," Gonzalez explains, "once the owner has an idea of the materials he needs, they all get together and go up to the mountains" (Gonzalez, 2000, p. 57).

Once the site was decided and cleaned, the second stage, say Gonzalez and Gonzalez, was for the Bribri to get together and go to the forest to cut the materials during the full moon (*sutr'u*), which according to the builders, gives the materials more strength. It might have taken more than one day to cut everything, and once the Bribri builders were done, they returned to the site where the house was then laid out.

This third stage was laying out the house:

Using two peews and a cord, a circle is drawn on the soil. The center is marked and then the first post is located at the side where the sun comes out in the morning. The next post is located in front of the first one, and then the next two are located to the north and south. By measuring the middle distance between every two posts, the other four posts are located... Depending on the dimension of the house, old dwelling could have been bigger and would have had 12 or 16 posts. The eight posts are set one arm length (measured from the shoulder to the tip of the fingers) under the soil. They are all given an inclination towards the outside since they are going to work under compression (Gonzalez and Gonzalez, 2000, p. 29).

According to Gonzalez and Gonzalez (2000), the fourth step was to dig the external posts and, helped by the central post that marks the center, the Bribri would tie them at the highest point of the structure. The next step was building the three main rings that were going to hold the whole structure together. The rings built in this fifth stage divided the total height of the conic structure in four equal parts. If needed, secondary rings were built in between these main rings to provide enough distance for the leaves of the roof to overlap. Once the main structure was finished, the sixth stage started—tying the roof. “Once all the rings are finished, the roof, which was previously built as separate panels of leaves tied together, is tied to the main structure. The distance between the rings allow the leaves to overlap enough so that there is no water penetration” explains Gonzalez (2000, p. 46). A seventh stage included building an overhang roof for the door. This roof prevented the water from entering through the door, which was the only opening the house had. Once the house was finished, the last event took place: a ritual to sanctify the house was followed by a celebration. According to Gonzalez (2000), once the construction was finished, all the Bribri that participated in the construction were invited to a big inauguration *chichada*, in which the house was ‘cleaned from evil forces’ and corn seeds, representing the origin of the Bribri, were planted in the floor’s layer of soil, formed and obtained from mother Earth.

These eight steps, described together in table 4.1, made the construction of a conic house one of the most important Bribri traditions. For some, it is still a reason to perform rituals and celebrate, to share and try to represent the Bribri sacred world. As Gonzalez and Gonzalez describe it, this process is about “building a cultural space in the middle of the forest, using natural resources whose characteristics are similar to those of humans... thus it can’t be taken



carelessly" (Gonzalez, 1989, video). This following narration by a Bribri builder clearly indicates how every step of the building process of a traditional Bribri conic house has a meaning:

It is a tradition of the older Indians... they begin looking for the people and then they all cut leaves, the wood you need... once everything is ready, the leaves and the wood, they have a small celebration... people like to build their houses close to the river... now the big chief in charge of the construction of the round house, who is old... there is a lot of old people... women weave the leaves, men measure the distances and the space the ranch the house is going to occupy... then they put the eight posts, which they call *jugatas*... and they put them up... they need the eight *jugatas* and a central post... you climb the central post and tight four of the eight posts, you tie them with wicker, which we call *nanaguchi*... this lasts more than nails, the insects don't eat it...and then you tie the other 4 posts, which are call *juchguika*... and then you have 33 secondary posts... you tie them all... then you tie the leaves, to other 23 round structures, round... when you finish the last one of the *juparas*, the one on top we call *jutsa*... when everything is done, around ten adults tie the leaves... it takes like 7 days... what is left from the wood is left out and save in a secret spot and then they make chichi (a drink) to inaugurate... with this *juchichi* they bless all the house and then the rest of the wood is burn where the sun rises, from the front door... and they also burn the central post because we don't want insects to eat it... that is called *jubetetue*... the central post is taken by the chief that built the house and thrown in a secret place where people don't see it... before anything is done inside the house you have to wait for the Java who paints figures of *Cibu* in every post, beginning from the east, and then west where *Zula* is, and then north where *Ayabru*, the owner of the earth, and then south where the bird sings... these bird don't show often... (Gonzalez, 1989, video).

Once one understands that the construction process of a traditional conic house was and is still sacred, the study of the symbolism of the houses' elements becomes important too. The fact that the Bribri and many archaic societies built this symbolic house type the way they did, is explained by Mircea Eliade. It has a relationship with the fact that we, as persons, feel and experience the world as if we were 'a center' and the rest of the world is around us:

What we find as soon as we place ourselves in the perspective of religious man of the archaic societies is that the world exists because it was created by gods, and that the existence of the world itself 'means' something, 'wants to say' something, that the world is neither mute nor opaque, that is not an inert thing without purpose or significance (Eliade, 1957, p. 165)

The meanings of the construction stages, indicated in the last column of table 4.1, are discussed extensively by Gonzalez (2000), who explains topics such as the rounded plan, the conic form, the eight posts and the center post.

For example, the importance of the center for the Bribri, in our world, and in our experience on earth, becomes clear when we understand that, as Eliade puts it,



There is no other way of understanding a foreign mental universe than to place oneself inside it, at its very center, in order to progress from there to all the values that it possess (Eliade, 1957, p. 165).

	Traditional Building Process of a Bribri Conic House	Bribri Belief or Meaning
1	Finding a site that fulfills conditions such as flatness, good visual domain and closeness to a water source. It is usually found on top of a hill, where it should also be protected from strong winds. Once the site is chosen, it is cleaned and prepared for construction.	Cibu gave the Bribri the Talamanca region for them to take care of and as their home in the cosmos.
2	Gathering the construction materials together. The Bribri get together and go up the mountain where the main materials to build the house are found. They should know how much materials they need so they don't cut more than what they needed. The materials are then peeled and smoked.	The Bribri believe all elements in nature are alive, so they try not to cut (or kill) more than what is necessary.
3	Tracing the house on the site. With a pew and a vine, a circle is traced. The circle is then divided in four parts—corresponding each to a main direction—and then divided in eight parts.	The circle means the center of the world; the person, protection.
4	The main posts are put into holes previously dig at each division. Each of the posts is inclined towards the center point at the top of the central post and once they all meet, they are tied together using vine.	Eight is a magical number for the Bribri; eight are the tribes that were first created by <i>Cibu</i> .
5	Transversal beams are built to divide the conic structure formed by the main posts. The entire height is divided in four parts by three main rings. If needed, these four parts are divided into shorter divisions so that the leaves that form the roof panels can cover the total distance and overlap.	The Bribri Universe is divided in four layers above and four layers below the surface of the earth.
6	The final structure is then covered by panels previously assembled. The panels are made of dry leaves and overlap so that the rain does not go through.	The conic enclosure from the inside symbolizes and is considered the celestial vault.
7	An overhang roof is built on top of the only opening—the door—to prevent water from entering the inside of the conic structure.	This is a functional solution for climatic necessity.
8	A celebration is performed by the owners and the builders. Dances and songs are performed and the host provides food for everyone who helped during the construction.	Cibu will protect the house.

Table 4.1. The traditional building process of a conic house, based on Gonzalez and Gonzalez, 2000, pp. 23-53.

About the issue of the central point, Bozzoli (1979) and explains that among the Bribri, *Surayum* is the center of the world, which, according to their tradition, is located on the high points of the Talamanca Mountain System in *Alto Lari*. This is the place where *Cibu*, helped by *Sura* (an earth divinity) and other beings, created the human universe of the Bribri. This is the center where *Cibu* built the first house—the cosmos:

The center is always enhanced by the circular form of the plan, which when turned into a cone tridimensionally, integrates the other worlds that exist in the human and metaphysical worlds of the Bribri religion. As a center it also functions as the point where the three main worlds meet: hell (the world of the dead), earth (the world of the living) and heaven (the world of the gods.) These three cosmic levels are expressed in the rings of the house that divide it in four major parts.

The circular form has been the base for many vernacular constructions around the world. The reason behind choosing the circle is because in nature, the great *Cibu*, made it all round: the sun, the moon, the earth; even day and night are circular stages that go around the earth. Thus, the circle is also the representation of time (Gonzalez, 1989, video).

Another reason why the house was circular is because of the protection this form offers from any evil spirits. As Gregorio Soto, a Bribri builder explained to Gonzalez and Gonzalez (2000, p.45), *Cibu* created Earth and then sent the spirits out of it. For them, everything that is inside the world was meant to be here, but the rest belongs to the outside, to the other worlds.

Gonzalez and Gonzalez (2000, p. 93) explain that the importance of the center also has a relationship with the presence through history of the 'white man' around their lands. Their visual world is dominated by the Atlantic and Pacific oceans that can be seen from the mountains they live in. The mountains are their world, the oceans belong to the domains of the 'white', making reference to the arrival of the Spanish conquerors.

Everything in the house related to the center, which was marked during construction by a central post that was later removed. This post represented the central axis that joins heaven and earth, it communicates this world with the world of the gods. According to Ricardo Reyes "[the Bribri] were placed in the center by *Cibu*, in the vertical post and he placed you (whites) in the periphery... we know this because of our history... The post remembers the center of creation, the moment and place when *Cibu* created the first house" (Gonzalez, 1989, video).

There were eight main posts around the center of the house—the eight main clans within the Bribri—and they were all represented in the house. The four main clans were placed first (east, west, north and south) representing the Tsibriwak, Siibawak, Kabewak and korkiwak clans. The other four were represented by the remaining four posts. They all met together, at the top, and that was the place that *Cibu* named the base for the world of the living. As Hernan Segura comments:

The house, that we call *U-Sure* in Bribri, has eight posts that god himself put there and they represent the clans that he brought to hold the house together... god himself put them there so that when we were asked to tell our history, we would remember the eight clans he first placed on Earth (Gonzalez, 1989, video).

The posts are dug one arm length into the soil, relating them to the human body, to the people that *Cibu* put on Earth to hold the house together.

Gonzalez and Gonzalez (2000, p.120) also explain that, in Bribri dialect, the word that designates the term house, *U-Sure*, means "house in form of spearhead directed to the sky" and "round house in the male form". There is then a clear relationship with an object that crosses, that goes through all the layers of the different worlds.

According to Bozzoli (1979), the meaning of other words the Bribri used is of particular interest to understand the meaning of the house. The expression the Bribri used to say 'build' or 'construct' was "I am making *ku-we*", which meant 'I am doing a basket or a house in form of a basket.' In order to say 'let's build a house', they would say '*kokuyukok*', which meant 'let's go do basket.'

Bozzoli (1979, p.27) also explains another interesting expression the Bribri used in relation to building a house meant 'I am going to dig a hole to bury something', which clearly kept the relationship with that of a basket where corn seeds—the Bribri—were stored. As mentioned before, the correlation between building a house and knitting a basket is also interesting, because both activities involve gathering materials from the forest and then the creation of a woven grid of similar form. In other words, there is a clear relationship between the human being (the seeds), the basket and the house—the three are handicrafts, the first made by Sibú, the other two by humans whose knowledge was given by the same god.

Once one understands how meaningful these houses were for the Bribri and how important all the symbolism it involves were for their culture, one asks oneself: why did it change and what happened to the way the Bribri 'live in this world', their culture, their beliefs and their cosmology? Most of these meanings were never mentioned by the Bribri builders in the museum or the Bribri I interviewed in Talamanca. It is clear to me that most of their myths and rituals are not practiced today and have lost their importance. Today the way the Bribri build is less meaningful and less symbolic; it no longer puts them in contact with the 'wholly other' and is no longer sacred.

### **3. Why did the form of the Bribri dwelling changed from conic to rectangular?**

In trying to answer this last question, one can study the works of Gonzalez (2000), Gabb (1880) and Golliher (1977). These authors agree on the fact that the change from the conic to the rectangular house is related to both the loss of cultural and traditional values due to the contact with other cultures and to the change in the value system of the Bribri. In Bozzoli's (1979) and

Guevara's (2002) works, the emphasis is not the change of the house form, but both agree on the evolution of the Bribri culture and the changes in their value system.

Gabb (1880) was one of the first researchers to write about the Bribri. In his work, he only describes the conic houses—for the Bribri, he says, no other kind of structure is as important as the conic dwelling. Gabb describes the houses as "circular, tall structures" and emphasizes the importance they had for the Bribri by saying that "the Bribri houses are not just better built, but better taken care of in comparison to their neighbors' houses, the Cabecares" (Gabb, 1880, p. 146).

As already mentioned, Gonzalez and Gonzalez (2000) have written probably the most extensive study on the Bribri house to date. In their research, they found four other Bribri dwelling types, besides the conic house. Thus, historically, they divide the different Bribri house typologies into five: (1) conic, (2) circular plan-conic roof, (3) elliptical plan, (4) front with semicircular form, and (5) rectangular plan-two pitched roof (Gonzalez, 2000, p.24). A description of each type helps to



Fig 4.1. Conic House, Talamanca, Costa Rica, 1902.  
Photo: National Museum Archives.

explain the typological changes these houses have gone through historically and how the change from conic to rectangular happened.

According to Gonzalez (2000), the first and most significant type is the conic house (fig. 4.1), which, as said before, symbolizes the universe as the Bribri understand it. With a circular plan and a conic roof extending to the floor, it symbolized the Bribri cosmology.

As explained before, a central post surrounded by eight pillar was first built and then tied together by three main rings. Palm leaves were used to enclose the whole house, leaving just one opening to the east.



Fig 4.2. Circular Plan-Conic Roof House, Talamanca, Costa Rica, 2002. Photo: Luis Diego Quiros.

Gonzalez (2000) states that the first variation of the conic house arrived when the conic form changed into a wall-and-roof system. A circular plan was traced and then lifted up as a wall (fig.4.2). This type also had eight main posts and was enclosed with



palm leaves. The conic roof was built on top of the wall using the same central post, and two entrances were created.

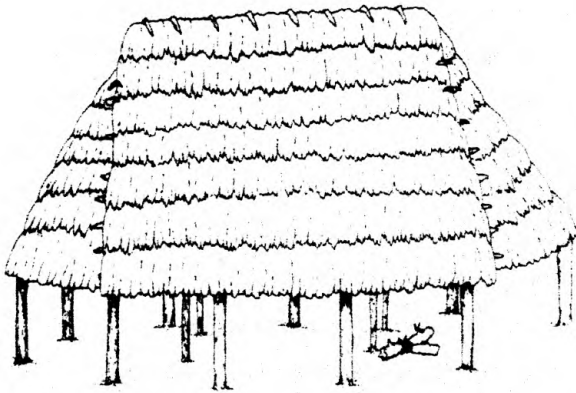


Fig 4.3. Elliptical Plan Bribri House, Talamanca, Costa Rica, from Gonzalez and Gonzalez, p. 45, 2000.

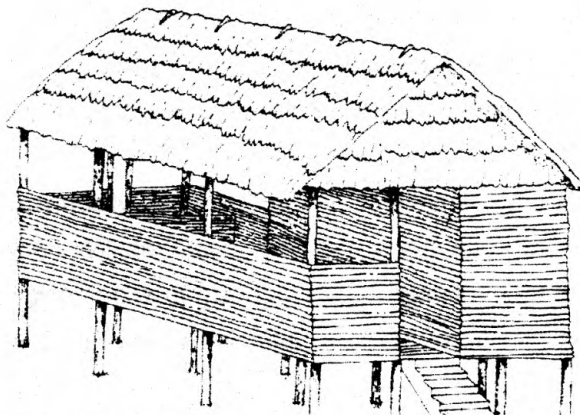


Fig 4.4. Rectangular Bribri House, Talamanca, Costa Rica, from Gonzalez and Gonzalez, p. 24, 2000.



Fig 4.5. Caribbean house, Puerto Viejo, Costa Rica, 2001. Photo: Luis Diego Quiros.

The next change is based on a wall-and-roof system but produced another house form—an elliptical plan with a round-edged two-pitched roof and eight main posts (fig.4.3). Also having two entrances, this house type shows a great difference from the original conic house.

A fourth type type, according to Gonzalez, was a very similar house type with round-edged two-pitched roof but with just six posts and no enclosure. This type, which was not very common, was also found in different cultures such as the Cabecares—a neighboring tribe who shared building knowledge with the Bribis.

According to Gonzalez and Gonzalez(2000) the most recent type is the rectangular house (fig. 4.4). With a rectangular plan and a two-sided pitched roof, this house is now elevated from the ground by pillars and reminds one of the Caribbean house form (see fig.4.5). Two entrances and six posts are the basic structure. Inside the house is sometimes divided into different rooms. This rectangular house type was also studied by Golliher (1977), who describes it as “representative of the process of change” the Bribri culture has gone through in the last decades.

As explained earlier, the conic house was most meaningful for the Bribis, but it



changed with the passing of the years and nowadays it is hard to find. Today, the rectangular houses are found everywhere in lower Talamanca, but just a few appear in the upper parts of the region, where the contact with other cultures is less. But according to my observations and recent studies like Golliher's (1977) there is a tendency on the part of the Bribis to construct rectangular houses rather than continuing building the conic dwelling.

This process of change from conic to rectangular is explored in more detail by the work of Golliher (1977), who argues that the rectangular house in Talamanca is a very recent typology and considers it is probably a product of the contact between the Bribis and the Spanish and Caribbean cultures. According to Golliher (1977), one of the first contacts between the Bribis and the Spanish happened in 1563, when Vasquez de Coronado, and Spanish conqueror and adventurer, crossed the Talamanca range. He found resistance from the tribe. But it was not until around the year 1600 that the city of Santiago de Talamanca was founded. The city was later destroyed in 1610 when Diego de Sojo tried to rob the gold from the Bribis. Years later, the Saint Francis missionaries were able to live in peace with the Bribis, but they also faced problems of survival. Over time, the city and region lost population and very little is known of the region's history until many years later. Golliher (1977) demonstrates that further expeditions and wars took place in the region while the missionaries were present.

Historically, we still find the traditional conic form type to be dominant around the year 1860, when William Gabb, the first person who recorded his experiences with the Bribis, crossed the region in one of his trips. He published one of the first descriptions of the Bribri houses where he wrote they were "circular, from 30 to 50 feet in diameter and around the same height" (Gabb, 1978).

According to Golliher's notes, the first contact the Bribri had with a non-traditional building type probably happened around 1870 when a new international period began on the eastern coast of Costa Rica with the arrival of the United Fruit Company (UFC). The company built a train line and seeded banana crops with the help of blacks brought from The Antilles: "the houses the UFC built were common rectangular structures, raised on pilotis; in clear contrast with the native form types of the time," Golliher explains.

Golliher also traces the first changes in the traditional conic house to the beginnings of the nineteenth century. The conic structures had already evolved into circular and oval, with roof but no enclosure. They were now being elevated—everything but the kitchen was raised above the ground. According to Golliher, divisions in the interior spaces and rooms started to emerge—the Bribis had started copying the way the 'whites' used to live. "One of the main changes in the Bribis cultural patterns happened at the same time," adds Golliher, referring to the changes in

the way the Bribri were building then: "the natives started living in groups, in contrast with the dispersed arrangement of the ancient houses through the mountains" (Golliher, 1977, p. 150).



Fig 4.6. Recent Bribri rectangular House, Talamanca, Costa Rica, 2002. Photo: Luis Diego Quiros.

Golliher (1977) and Gonzalez and Gonzalez (2000) also emphasize the fact that the change from conic to rectangular is also related to the ease of construction of the newer type. My experience supports this point too, because it seems that the rectangular form, even though it is less meaningful, is faster and cheaper to build nowadays (fig.4.5). While interviewing the Bribri in Talamanca, I noted also that some of them also mention other reasons for this change. For example the availability of materials is less than in

recent years and it is easier and faster to build rectangular houses than conic houses. The loss of contact with the earth in their daily activities, the loss of ancient shamans and the search for jobs, Western education and money, are all factors that speed the process of the change in form and meaning.

According to my observations and studies, these changes in the form of the house are also related to the new economic system adopted in the region, a monetary system previously not known by the Bribri. Today, these raised, rectangular houses serve as houses for just one family, and are more accessible via roads. In general these houses are one kilometer apart, or a ten-minute walk. Some of the houses are strategically located to make sales of traditional products easier. Trucks and foreign people visit the region and today the Bribri obtain some of their income by selling their crafts.

In general, after reviewing the literature on the traditional conic Bribri house, its beginnings, symbolisms, meanings and recent adaptations, I have no doubt that the newer rectangular houses are not the earlier vernacular buildings that had powerful meanings and symbolisms for the Bribri. I also conclude, based on my observations, that the sacredness of these structures has been almost entirely lost and that they no longer represent or provide for the numinous experience to happen for their dwellers. I think it will be very hard to go back to the traditional way of building and that actually the Bribri are not interested in doing so for their everyday dwelling

space. If they do build or talk or share these traditions its because of an artificial, commercial interest rather than it being part of their everyday beliefs.

The final chapter of this thesis discusses, therefore, how the Bribri's actual situation is a product of the loss of sacredness—not just in the building process, but in many other aspects of their lives. The chapter focuses on the tribe's situation as described by authors like Maria Eugenia Bozzoli and Marcos Guevara—who as we have seen throughout the thesis—have been in contact with the Bribris and know much about them.

**CHAPTER 5**  
**THE LOSS OF THE SACRED AND ITS CONSEQUENCES**  
**THE ACTUAL SITUATION AND NEEDS IN TALAMANCA**

Now that the sacredness and differences in the processes of building conic and rectangular Bribri houses has been presented, the final chapter of this thesis discusses the Bribri's actual cultural and economic situation as a consequence of the loss of the sacredness in their lives. All of the authors studied in previous chapters agree that in the past decades, the Talamanca region and the Bribis have lost an important part of their history and culture. Their subsistence systems changed, their landscape changed, their rituals changed and these shifts are all shown in the change of the traditional building process of the conic *U-Sure*. By analyzing these changes, one can arrive at the conclusion that the loss of the sacredness of this process also involves a shift from a sacred life to a more profane existence.

But, what are the things the Bribis have lost? Why? and how do these shifts relate to the possibility of recovering the sacred? These and other topics are discussed based on my own observations and the description and proposals made by Bozzoli and Guevara in *The Costa Rican Indigenous People in the XXI Century* (Bozzoli and Guevara, 2002).

This process of change is also seen in many other places of the world. And a basic but catastrophic consequence, as Eliade explains, is a negative vision of life, a life without meaning:

The perspective changes completely when the sense of the religiousness of the cosmos becomes lost. This is what occurs when, in certain more highly evolved societies, the intellectual elites progressively detach themselves to the patterns of traditional religion. The periodical sanctification of cosmic time then proves useless and without meaning. The gods are no longer accessible through cosmic rhythms. The religious meaning of the repetition of paradigmatic gestures is forgotten. But repetition emptied of its religious content necessarily leads to a pessimistic vision of existence (Eliade, 1957, p.157).

The Bribis then, are shifting their lives—lives they have lived for centuries in contact with the sacred forces of Talamanca—to a profane, modern understanding of the natural world that *Cibu* created for them. The new rectangular houses no longer represent their cosmos, and are only a practical solution for their contemporary daily needs. The Bribis no longer see their universe represented in the conic form, they do not repeat or practice traditional and ancient rituals to remember what their god *Cibu* left for them. They are changing and becoming a modern society, and as a result, they are getting rid of the possibility of being in contact with the sacred.

One of the positive things still present in the Bribri's contemporary situation is that the majority of them still know and remember the story of the creation of the world. This makes one think that

they are losing the sacred in their built cultural expressions, but in a sense, they still remember when *Cibu* created the universe. During my visits I noticed that no matter what form the house they lived in had, they told me the same story every time.

This situation presents an opportunity to recover what they have lost, since, as Eliade explains,

This nonreligious man descends from homo religious and, whether he likes it or not, he is also the work of religious man; his formation begins with the situations assumed by his ancestors. In short, he is the result of a process of desacralization... profane man cannot help preserving some vestiges of the behavior of religious man, though they are emptied of religious meaning. Do what he will, he is an inheritor. He cannot utterly abolish his past. He forms himself by a series of denials and refusals, but he continues to be hunted by the realities that he has refused and denied (Eliade, 1957).

As pointed out in previous chapters, the Bribri tribe has been in contact with other cultures since the first Spanish expeditions on the region. Ever since that first contact, there has been a lot of cultural sharing between them and other societies. Among them was the culture that affected the actual way of building the rectangular house type: the Afro-Caribbean culture brought from The Antilles to help build the train line to the Atlantic. This contact has not just affected the house type, but also has given the chance for cross-cultural changes in both societies. For example, both societies have shifted their way of life by entering the tourism business that works so well in the region. Many Costa Rican indigenous people have learned to cope with the presence of tourists and have actually change their agricultural production to a new mode of making money, as tourist's guides.

This produced a change not just in the regional economy, but also a change in the view of the landscape and of their own place. More and more local people started feeling alienated from their natural environment and started seeing it as an object that can be exploited rather than a sacred site that *Cibu* provided for them to live in.

Another example is the crafts market. Today, many of the crafts produced by locals are sold to foreigners as a way of making a living. Local people now spend most of their time figuring out how to make money rather than practicing the self-sustainable agriculture they used to. Even building a conic house is considered to "take a lot of time and materials," rather than as a way of getting in contact with the sacred. This result has produced situations like the one I described in one of my visits, where in order to be able to take a picture of the house where the Bribri sold their crafts, I was forced to buy a tourist trinket.

Besides the contact with other cultures, the contact with governmental institutions through history has also been problematic. The State has had a colonialist practice of dealing with indigenous



reserves, treating them as if they had no past, no religion and no culture. New services such as health institutions, roads and transportation, schools and community centers have been built without taking into account the cultural difference between the Bribis and 'the white people' from the city.

State and private projects such as hydroelectric plants, interstate roads and tourist developments have created a resistance from local people. They have been ignored in the process of making decisions and even worse, they have been moved from what they consider their land, the land they have been living on for hundreds of years but which now belongs to the state. An example is provided by Victoria Villalobos:

In 1980, RECOPE (Costa Rican Petroleum Refinery) started their petroleum explorations in Talamanca... The native communities were violently affected, roads were open in their territories, bridges built and explosions of dynamite were part of the everyday jobs; the forest was giving space to the saws. Hundreds of lonely and foreign men worked and had fun in town. Suddenly on pay days, dozens of prostitutes came to town. Soon young natives got involved in the business. A lot of young single mothers and kids with no father was the outcome. The money was causing chaos, many of the workers, natives included, wasted their money in alcohol, and many more indigenous left home to work with the 'company'. Directors of native movements were bought with trips and high salaries. And to make things worse, since 1983, RECOPE started firing workers and started with the natives (Villalobos, 1999, p.128).

One example of a questionable practice by the government was the so called habitation project, where the State promised to give the Bribis housing and services. But the final outcome of the project was various concrete and masonry built houses that had no relationship with the housing type the Bribis were used to for hundreds of years. These houses were not just out of place but were uncomfortable and did not respond to any climatic condition or myths, beliefs or traditions of the Bribis. As a result, many Bribis decided to rebuild their own houses, with their own materials and their own work. They now feel and appreciate their houses more than ever, and this is a sign of the possibility of restoring the contact with the sacred.

Many of today's Bribri publications strongly criticize the way the government treats them. Listening to radio programs or reading some of these Bribri publications, I found out that there is still a lot of racism against the Costa Rican indigenous people. For example, a story found in *The Native Societies of Costa Rica* (Bozzoli, 1982) tells the story of two Bribis who went to the city and were stopped and interrogated by the police because they were thought to be illegal immigrants. Even after showing proper identification, the police still made calls to the governmental office in Guatuso to be sure they were really Costa Ricans.

Another issue that affects the way the Bribris live is deforestation. Many private companies and governmental projects have destroyed forest areas to build roads, plantations, or even just declared them national protected areas where nobody can live. This has reduced the possibilities of finding enough materials to build their traditional house type, and even a rectangular house is now harder to build (even though it takes less materials and less work) just because of the absence of natural materials near the inhabited areas. One example of the deforestation problem is discussed by Guevara:

In the 70's, Costa Rica lost 50 thousand hectares of forest every year. In the 90's, the country produces 1,2 million of cubic meters of wood, 500 thousand are produced by illegal practices... In 1950, the Maleku tribe lived in a 11 thousand hectares territory, but the Sate did not realized the proper legal inscription of the lands, which were previously defined by the Geographic Costa Rican Institute since 1957... In 1967 there were still forest areas in the region, but in 1973 a lot of those had been destroyed by colonizers and the natives became workers than became poorer through the years... it was not until 1976 when the Indigenous Reserve of Guatuso was created, with a total area of 3000 hectares, a majority of which are owned by non-indigenous practicing cattle raising (Guevara, 1999, p.25).

The effect this has had on the ritual-building process is devastating. People don't get together anymore to build. It is harder to find people to help if everybody is trying to make money to survive in the new capitalist world. It is even easier to save money, buy wood in a local superstore and then just find any material to cover the walls. Example of this are the new houses being built by Bribris, and even the functions these house now have: some are part house and part grocery stores. How sacred can this be?

Many of these problems have created in the Bribris a defensive feeling—they do not believe in the government any more. A result has been that more and more groups want to be isolated from anything that is related to the federal government. This situation has also produced a division within the tribe, where some members want to be isolated and others want to live a Western modern life. The Bribri tribe is not one united culture anymore, it has been divided in portions, which leads to a loss of communication and thus the loss of myths, religion and cultural history.

Today it is very hard, if not impossible, to find Bribri with a clear understanding of their beliefs and practices. Some Bribri know about medicine, some know about rituals, and some know about religion; but the figure of the *awapa*, or *shaman*, has been lost forever. There are no spiritual leaders as there used to be. There is no longer a direct contact with the sacred, with their gods. What is left is a vague idea of ancient stories and believes. The tribe is closer and closer from forgetting their past as a group, forgetting how sacred their lives were.

According to Bozzoli, there are several problems that have to be solved in the next several years if options are to be provided for the Bribri to recover from the loss of their sacred life. Bozzoli proposes 5 major changes:

1. Returning the territories to the original owners.
2. Occidental education should not be imposed.
3. Better organization of the indigenous movements.
4. Stop deforestation.
5. Provide dignifying housing to maintain cultural and traditional values.

The first problem is that of the territories and the possibility of returning them to their original owners. With the slogan "a native with no soil is a dead native", Bozzoli manifests the importance of providing enough land to the communities so that they can practice their ancient methods of production such as agriculture and hunting. In a sense, this alternative will also provide the opportunity for the Bribri to be in contact with the sacred site Sibub made for them to live.

A second problem is the way education has been brought to the region and the need for a change. "Historically", Bozzoli (2002, p.56) implies, "education has been a major destruction factor for the native cultures. Conventional education, imposed by the state in a systematic way, provoked the loss of vernacular dialects, an undervalue of cultural believes and the loss of tradition." It is important that future education programs are based on the tribe's value systems as well as on their tradition, religions, dialects and believes. The imposed western thoughts have just produced indifference towards their past and their ancestors. It is important that the sacred is also allowed to flow through tradition and oral stories, so that the contact with an original way of understanding the world is kept as an important part of their culture.

Another problem Bozzoli points to is the lack of organization the tribal movements have. So far, their associations have not been well recognized and their motives and intentions do not get the attention they deserve. This has caused a loss of interest and a decline in the number of tribes with ideas related to the recovery of traditions and beliefs. There is also another main value for encouraging indigenous people to organize: the political strength they gain when they act as a group, not to mention the possibility this provides for sharing, discussing and trying to bring back lost rituals and traditions.

Two last problems are probably the ones I consider to be the most important and they related to the conservation of the regional natural resources and dignifying housing. While the author refers to the knowledge the Bribri have of their landscape and natural resources and the possibility of

sharing that with the government, I find that the Bribri's most important need is to be given the possibility of being in contact with a world they used to know and from where they might redevelop a total cosmology. The recovery of that man-environment relation will not just provide for the fulfillment of their everyday basic needs but will give them the possibility of going back to their roots and finding the sacred again. This will hopefully produce a revival of the ancient building type and process.

The Bribri tribe example is a clear contemporary case of loss of the sacred. There is no longer a clear relationship between the way they live and build their beliefs. And what is the relevance of understanding and exploring cases like this one? As Eliade explains it, contemporary society - modern man - is a product of a similar process, where at the beginning of history we were tied to our given reality in a stronger way and, through centuries, that bond has been lost. We have gone from a sacred reality based on the very basic understanding of life itself to putting manmade things and man himself as the only important point of departure for the experience of the world.

The Bribri are still in the process of losing their traditional sacred world, but we can learn and try to understand how this phenomenon might be reversed. In a way, the intention of this study was to try to understand the Bribri case to be able to design and build architecture that can have an impact on society; to be able to produce a meaningful architecture that would take us back to the essence of life itself and that could be the turning point from which we try and go back to a better way of living.

To conclude, the Bribri example shows very clearly how humankind used to live in a more meaningful, reality-based world, where the contact with the holy other was part of everyday life and where the very essence of life itself was manifested not just in cultural expressions and rituals, but also in the way people built; and how through history and because of contact with modern society's ideas and expressions the link between man, earth and the holy other has been lost. The result is a profane society where nothing is really meaningful and where life becomes a mere biological process. Through the understanding of this sacredness, we are inclined to think that the final process is undesirable and that we need a change. This change involves a clear understanding of the relationship between the sacred and the profane, the given original reality, and all manmade creations, both the "primitive" and the "modern". It is through this understanding that we will be able to propose useful new ideas that will provoke real change.

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